The Life Sentence

Victoria Cross

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By

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CHAPTER I

It was a perfect day in June, and the hot afternoon sunshine poured down on the steel tracks of the Great Western line, making them glitter like burnished silver as the sun rays danced upon them. The express from London swung smoothly along, mile after mile, through enchanting vistas of wavering trees, laughing meadows, and by sparkling streams, reflecting in their shallow pools the cloudless turquoise of the sky.

In one of the first-class carriages alone sat two passengers, a man and a girl.

The man sat at the far end reading a paper, and half concealed behind it; the girl leant forward in her seat, looking through the window, and the sun fell on the pastel blue of her dress and seemed to linger in her cloud of bright hair, under the velvet hat, as if it found her the prettiest thing to rest upon and wished to caress her. And she was so pretty, this girl, although her nose was not the classic shape, nor any of her features perfect. The burnished mass of her hair against the silky whiteness of her skin, the blue eyes like great clear pools, with their dark lashes, under their soft brown brows, and the colour of the mouth like a damask rose, these were the birthday gifts of Nature to her at the commencement of her sixteenth year.

As she gazed out now, the blue eyes were troubled; there was a shadow in

their depths which deepened when she turned her head for a moment and saw her companion was still hidden behind the newspaper. She looked out again at the ever-changing landscape with a sigh. The extreme care that had evidently been bestowed upon her toilette, the beautiful and somewhat extravagant dress, the uncertain expression on her face, the slight wavering flush that came and went so quickly in her cheeks, all suggested, even to the most careless observer, that she was a bride, and the new dressing-case beside her, the new cloaks on the opposite seat, confirmed this fact.

It had been a very smart wedding that day in town, for the bridegroom's wealth, position, and status made it so. To the girl this day had been the longest in her life—it seemed of endless, superhuman length. When had it begun? It seemed

ages ago that she had risen after a sleepless night and commenced to move in the long pageant of dressing and decorating herself, of receiving her bridesmaids, of seeing new faces, of answering congratulations; then the drive to the church in her white splendour, the beauty of the building, the scent of the banks of flowers, the wonderful music that seemed lifting her soul to unknown heights, the service, the solemnity of the moment when she knelt on those marble steps; then the return, that seemed so swiftly made and of which she could remember nothing, except one glorious, golden moment, when the man beside her had bent over her and kissed her. That moment hung in her memory and blazed there, as a great ruby seems to blaze in the firelight of a shadowy room. Then again more glitter and pomp and colour, and voices and

faces, and hurry and more dressing, and through it all her heart was beating, trembling, almost breaking with delight, for she loved him, this man she had married, and all this idle show was nothing to her, except that it gave him to her, and her to him, and the great joy of that knowledge ran in waves all over her being, making her hands shake and her eyes swim. It was with difficulty she saw and talked and thought and did all that was required of her in order. But now it was over, leaving on her mind a confused vision of colour and splendour and laughter and music and voices; she had passed through it all, and now, so quietly and swiftly the great train was bearing them—*them*—together, into the heart of the green, silent country.

And now she was troubled. Why did he read the paper? *Why did he read*

that paper? The rhythmic thud, thud of the train beneath her feet seemed repeating the words and hammering them into her brain!

This was her wedding journey, and it was not going quite right; that was the half-formed thought in her brain. It was quite true she knew nothing of wedding journeys; this was her first; she had no experience. Perhaps they were like this, after all! She knitted her brows on the smooth, tranquil forehead, till they looked like a hard black line. She was trying to recollect not what she had read, for she had never been allowed to read anything about such things, but all that she had thought, which had led her to expect something different.

That kiss in the brougham! How delightful it had been! When would he kiss her again, she wondered. They

were alone in the carriage; it was full of sun and so quiet, with its soft, onward, rocking movement, and the maze of bright green woodlands beyond the windows. It was just the place to lean her head on his shoulder and feel his arm about her and be kissed!

She turned again and looked at him, still absorbed in his reading. He was a man of about fifty-eight, and though the disparity of years between him and his bride of sixteen was at once, of course, apparent, still any judge of human nature looking at him would know that he was a man whom women had loved at every age and would continue to love, till the hour of his death, and that at fifty-eight he was as dangerous to their peace of mind as at twenty-eight or thirty-eight. His figure, stretched out easily in the carriage as he sat in the extreme cor-

ner, had still all the litheness and symmetry of youth; it was slim, athletic-looking, finely proportioned, and had all that natural grace about it that comes from strength and use of that strength. If sloth is not one of the deadly sins, as our ancestors considered, it is certainly cursed with a deadly punishment. Sloth kills beauty. This man's active energy throughout his life had preserved all that beauty of outline and contour that the sloth and ease of middle life ordinarily destroys. A small head was well set on a long neck, and it would be very difficult amongst Englishmen to find a profile to match this one in straightness and distinction; the face, like the figure, had a clean-cut hardness, that generally belongs to youth alone; the skin, though lined by the emotions and passions of forty years, was clear, fine in texture and

lightly tanned, showing up on its pale brown tint, the deep black hair now growing a little thin and lined with grey; the eyebrows were straight and black on a good forehead; and the nose, high-bridged and fine, matched in beauty the kind mouth and perfectly modelled chin.

As he read on, unconscious of her gaze, the girl sat and looked at him in a trance of pleasure, her eyes fixed on his face, now visible above the folded paper, her hands clasped hard together in her lap. How she loved him, worshipped him, adored him! There was nothing—no, nothing—in this wide world she would not do for him. To die for him, that would be quite easy. But she would do more; she would live in agony, die by torture, be burnt or stoned to death, if this man asked it, wished it, smiled on her in reward. Such was her feeling,

such is all virgin love; it is reverence, worship, adoration. How happy she was! she reflected. What a priceless thing to have won his love! And he must love her, for he had everything, he was so rich—she remembered her mother had told her that—and she had nothing; she was poor, and he had lands and estates and castles and houses and money without limit, and every girl and every mother in town, so her mother had said, had wanted him in marriage, and he had seen these girls, beautiful girls with wealth and titles and girls of noble houses that he could have allied himself with, and he had left them all to choose her—her who had nothing! How wonderful it all was!

His face, how it enchanted her, leaning back in the shadow of the curtained window! Her mother's talk before the wedding had been all of his possessions,

of what he could give her, do for her, but the girl had hardly listened. His castles might have been cardboard toys, for her. The thought that leapt before her, turning all her being to joy, when her mother spoke of marriage, was of the moment when this face should bend over her, these arms hold her. But her parents had never mentioned anything like that. They had pointed out how excellent it would be for her to accept him, and asked whether she would do so, and she had murmured "Yes" with downcast eyes, and then fled away to her room, to throw herself face downwards on her bed and dream of his brows and eyes.

And now it was all done and he was hers, and her heart beat so with delight; she could hardly breathe as she sat and looked at him.

Suddenly the man laid down the paper,

his eyes fell upon hers, before she could avert them. Her face was strained and pale, her lips half open.

That look on a woman's face was too familiar to him to misread it for an instant. He leant forward, and drew her into his arms.

"My darling, I thought you were reading too!" and he glanced at the illustrated and comic papers which littered the opposite seat.

The girl put her lips against his neck. "Reading! How could I read *now,* and why should I when I have you to look at?" The words were almost a sob.

The man's face grew a shade paler, a look of anxiety contracted his brows.

"Sweetheart, you spoil me! You must not say such things."

"Why not?" came in the trembling accents from the soft lips on his neck.

"Now we are married I can say anything to you, can't I?"

The man pressed her to him, and stroked the soft loop of her hair that pushed out below her hat brim; and the girl lay still in his clasp, and shivered with delight at his touch. He looked worried and troubled, and the same cloud that had been in her eyes as she looked out at the landscape, grew up now in his as he turned them away from her form in his arms, through the window. After a minute he drew her head up gently from his shoulder, turned her face to him, and kissed her as he had done in the brougham; and all Paradise seemed to open before the girl, and all the music of the spheres seemed singing in her ears as he did so. It was only for a moment; then he put her from him gently and rose from his seat.

"We are nearly there," he remarked, as he began to gather together the papers and take her sunshade and scarf from the hat-rack.

A chill fell over the girl. It was not quite right. There was some shadow, some thin impalpable wall between them. What was the matter? That kiss was so divine, but so short. Why did he not prolong it? Why did he not wish to? She sat quite still and silent in her seat; that delightful fear that tinges all a young girl's adoration for an older man was upon her. She watched him as he collected their things, not daring to speak.

"There is the old place," the man said, after a moment, looking through the window. "That's Carlingford Towers; they look fine in this soft light. Does that view console you now for having foregone the regular honeymoon? Does

it reconcile you to settling down there with an old fogey like me?"

He drew the girl forward to the window. A magnificent block of old grey stone buildings showed softly against the luminous sky, the gold of which was melting slowly into rose. Velvet lawns like huge emeralds lay round the Towers to the south and west; on the bleak north they turned their back, nestling against a slope of glorious trees.

Carlingford Towers was supposed to be the most beautiful seat in the county, and the girl looked out upon it with unseeing eyes.

"I don't care where it is or where I have to settle as long as I am with you," she said in a very low tone; and looking down at the slight brown hand that yet had such tremendous power in it, she longed to lean down and press her lips

to it where it rested on the window-sill, but not daring to, she stood there motionless and afraid.

The man did not answer, and she saw his face was very pale and grave as he looked towards the Towers.

A carriage was waiting for them at Carlingford Station, and as the train slowed to a standstill and they descended in the flood of warm sunlight, filled with the fragrance of roses and jasmine, she forgot for a moment the chill that seemed settling round her heart; and then, just as she turned to speak to her maid, who had come up to take her dressing-case, she heard a voice behind her say—

"Ah, 'tis an unlucky day for sure! The poor master ought never to have married."

She turned quickly, and saw two old farm labourers, as they seemed to her,

close beside the train, watching the alighting of the pair and the arrangement of their luggage. Her husband had gone forward, her maid was waiting. She walked on. In another moment she was in the carriage, driving through the sweet-scented air under the rosy sky to her future home. The first notes of the nightingale came tremblingly through the golden evening, but her ears were deaf to the music, they seemed seared by those words just heard at the station.

When they reached the Towers she had no more time for thought—the garden, the great grey pile itself of buildings rising with so much stately grandeur against the golden sky, the lovely trees, all claimed her attention. *He* seemed to wish her to admire them, so in obedience to his wish she threw herself into enthusiastic praise of all these things.

Then there was the great hall where they entered—the tapestries, the armour, the old servants—and then she was separated from him and carried off to dress, yet one more troublesome dressing—the third in that endless day.

Still, she was consoled by the mirror, when, after an hour, she stood before it ready to go to dinner with him. Her gown was of the palest rose, embroidered with silver. It was cut low, and on her firm white breast rested her only ornament—a round pendant of diamonds with the word "Bruce," the one word in all the languages of the world for her—her husband's name—written in rubies across it.

What a vision she was with her sunny golden hair and turquoise eyes and those round white arms, dimpled and snowy, clasped by the gold and diamond brace-

lets Bruce had given her! The beauty of her own image soothed her; a delicious sense of power came to her. Only sixteen, and with nothing and yet so much! She had this to give. And that was all the use of her beauty in her eyes. She wanted it all, but only for this, just to delight and please this one man. She smiled back at herself, her eyes were radiant, her lips curled with laughter and red and warm. With steps the grass would hardly have bent under, she went down the great staircase.

Bruce was waiting at the foot of it for her. How splendid he looked! she thought. What a fitting master for all this state and grandeur round them! and a rush of devotion filled her as her eyes took in the beauty of his face and figure and carriage. She stopped a few steps

from the last. Had she followed her instinct she would have sunk to her knees at his feet and taken his hands to kiss.

"How lovely you look, my sweet!" he said, looking up at her as she paused a little above him. "Come, you must be hungry, I am sure. I arranged to have dinner in the little dining-room. The great hall seems desolate. In the little room we shall be closer together!"

They were standing side by side now, and he took her arm and pressed it. The girl, looking up, felt thrilled through and through with love for him, with feelings she could not express, and in silence they walked into the dining-room.

During dinner the servants were in the room, and only indifferent subjects were discussed. The girl talked and answered mechanically. The flower-laden table, the silver branching candlesticks, the

gleam of the glass, the ruby and topaz colours of the wines, swayed in an indistinct vision before her. When the dessert had been set on the table and they were at last left alone, a silence fell upon them, in which it seemed to her the beating of her heart must be audible. She sat still in her place, looking at him through the wreath of white roses and smilax that crowned the table. He looked very grave and preoccupied—almost as if he were unconscious of her presence. How long they sat there in silence the girl did not know, ages of time seemed flowing heavily over her head. She only felt she did not dare to move nor speak. At last he rose somewhat abruptly and came over to her.

"Are you not very tired, Flora? You must be. Would you like to go to your room now?"

The girl rose and stood before him, her eyes were cast down. It seemed as if iron were on the lids and she could not raise them to meet his. A great unhappiness, a sense of loss, of desolation, of fear, was closing round her. She could not tell why, nor could she find any words to express her feelings.

"As you wish," she murmured almost in a whisper.

Bruce bent over her, clasped her, kissed her, held her to his breast for one moment, then he released her. Mechanically the girl moved with him to the door. He opened it for her and stood back. She hesitated on the threshold. Oh, how she longed to find her voice, to ask him if he were not coming with her, if he would come to her, but the words stayed frozen on her lips! She did not know what was expected of her—perhaps it would not

be right for her to speak! Her great terror of offending him conquered her natural instinct. She passed out in silence, her heart bursting with all she left unuttered, and went slowly up the great staircase. Halfway up she heard the door below gently close. She went on up to her room, and as she entered it she caught sight of her own reflection in a long mirror facing her. She shut the door, and then crossed with quick step to her own reflection. As she looked at it, the load seemed to roll off her heart.

"How silly I am!" she thought, smiling at it. "Of course he will come; he *is* coming."

There was a tap at the door, and her maid entered, bearing on her arm her mistress' lilac silk dressing-gown.

"Shall I undress you now, madam?"

Flora hesitated. Then she looked

again at the long mirror. She was so lovely in that glow of rose satin with the diamonds blazing on her breast, and her gold hair all bound up with pearls. No, when he came he should see her like this again; then he could. . . .

She turned to the maid; a great wave of crimson flowed up over her throat and fair face to the edge of her hair.

"No, Aline, I am not ready yet, and—and I don't think I shall want you again. Please go to bed when you like."

The maid bowed impassively, laid the lilac robe on the bed, and withdrew, noiselessly shutting the door after her.

Flora stood alone and looked round. It was a large room that she found herself in, and beautifully decorated and furnished, in the French style, with everything in it to make it light and brilliant, contrasting sharply with the heavy kind

of furnishing that prevailed in all the other rooms at the Towers. There were beautiful inlaid tables from Italy, exquisite vases of Sèvres on the white mantelpiece, deep Florentine mirrors on the satin-covered walls, but the girl noticed nothing of all this. She walked restlessly about, backwards and forwards, with noiseless feet, on the white velvet pile of the carpet, nervous and agitated, like a young lioness turned into a new cage. When would he come? That was her single thought. This beautiful, lonely room, these lights and flowers, these rich curtains and hangings, these priceless inanimate objects brought from the ends of the earth, what were they to her? Could they speak to her, comfort her, caress her?

She wanted Bruce so much. Her body was tired, wearied out. She wanted to

end this interminable day; to be taken into his arms and rest there against his heart for hours and hours and hours, and whether she woke again from that sleep or not seemed to be of little account to her.

Minutes passed by. There was no sound except the soft silvery tone of the French clock, and its delicate clash as it marked every quarter go by. The girl grew more impatient every moment, and an impulse of anger and indignation against him rose in her from time to time to be instantly suppressed. "He does not know, certainly he does not know how much I want him to come," she told herself. At last in the silence there was a knock at the door. With an electric shock of extreme joy, she sprang from her chair. That was certainly Bruce. She ran to the door and threw it wide open,

her figure expanded, her eyes dilated, beautiful as a woman can only be when she really loves. The footman stood there with a tray of tea-things in his hands. That was all. She drew back. The man advanced respectfully, and set the tray on the nearest table.

"Mr. Challoner thought you would like your tea served here," he murmured.

The girl made a motion of assent. Her throat seemed closed, choking her. For an instant she longed wildly to detain the servant, to say, "Where is your master? What is he doing? Why is he not here? Find him, tell him to come to me," but she said nothing. The man left the room. Then she thought suddenly, why not write a little note, why not send a message to Bruce? There were bells there; in a moment she could call a servant to take it to him. She crossed the

room to a writing-table and drew out the paper and an envelope. Then she stopped again. What should she say? "How silly I am!" she thought, glancing at the clock. "It is quite early yet, only ten."

She left the note unwritten, and went back to the armchair and flung herself into it. The table with the tea-things on it was close to her. She poured out some tea and drank it. Then she leant back in the chair, each slender white hand grasping its velvet arm, her eyes on the clock, waiting. The quarters, the halves, the hours went by, gently toned out in the stillness, and as they went that curious silence of the night settled down upon the room. The slight sounds that had come from the garden below ceased. The occasional footfall passing her door also ceased. Now there was nothing.

The day had gone; the night was in full sway, and that also was passing. It was so late. The thought now in her mind was not, he has not come, but he will not come. Nervous, suffocated with distress, and with sharp anxiety beginning to grow up in her, she left her chair, and began to pace the length of the room again. A thousand thoughts like burning arrows seemed flying in a storm through her brain. Perhaps he was ill! Perhaps he had gone out in the grounds and some accident had happened to him! Perhaps he was lying somewhere needing help! Possessed with this idea, she ran suddenly across the room, pulled open her door, and looked out into the blackness. The corridor was unlighted, it was quite dark, but before her yawned the great well of the staircase, and at the bottom of that some dim lights were burning. Should

she go and seek him? But the place was so large, she had no idea how to find her way about in it. All was black and quite still, except at intervals came to her the muffled baying of the great hounds from the courtyard and the lower passages of the house, where they were allowed to roam loose at night. If she went out into this waste of unknown corridors and courts and rooms, could she ever find her way back? And if he should come in her absence? She shivered as she stood looking out into the blackness. After a time she drew back into the room. She could rouse the servants, of course, and inquire from them about him, and so find out if he were safe and well; but then —if he were! If it were only his *wish* to stay away from her! How angry he would be that she should draw the whole household to witness! No, no, she could

not do that. There was nothing she could do but wait and suffer, till he, of his own free will, appeared. She gently reclosed her door and went over to the mirror, to gaze upon herself with despairing eyes. It was all so lovely—the delicate flush of her cheeks, the grief of the wide, lustrous eyes, the heaving whiteness of her bosom, where now the blood-red ruby word "Bruce" lay like a brand upon it.

The clock toned softly *two* as she stood there, and, looking up, she saw a whiteness beyond the satin curtains of the windows. It was dawn. She went to them and tore them back from the panes, her hot hand crushed the white satin and almost wrenched it from its hangings. With burning eyes she looked out at all the beautiful grounds that stretched sleeping round the Towers. All was calm and

tranquil, pale and dim, in the pure, pearly whiteness of the dawn.

The night was over, and she had spent it alone! Tears rushed to her eyes; sudden fatigue and pain seemed to envelope her from head to foot. She let fall the curtain and walked unsteadily back into the room, towards the bed. She could stand up no longer. She was so very, very tired. The bed, beautiful in all its details and covered with a white satin quilt on which was emblazoned in gold the arms and crest of the Challoners swam before her eyes. She threw herself upon it in a passion of suffocating sobs. Disappointed, bitterly wounded, hurt, and amazed, she lay with the rough edges of all these feelings pressing upon her, and when at last fatigue conquered everything and shut her tear-blinded eyes,

it seemed to her as if she were sleeping upon knives.

Just as the clock was toning eight she woke again. The room was full of the sunlight that struggled through the curtains. She heard the notes of the birds beyond the windows. She sprang up. She was still clothed in her dress of last night. In fact, it was impossible for her to undress without help. What should she do now? She must ring for her maid. Her face flushed crimson as she thought of revealing her lonely vigil to the servant, but this impulse of vanity was swamped almost immediately in the flood of anxiety that swept over her. Well, if anything *had* happened to Bruce, it must be known by now in the household. She would be told. White and with trembling hand she rang her bell. A few sec-

onds and the maid appeared; neat, with a perfectly impassive face, the woman entered. Her eyes took in her mistress's attire, the still braided hair, the pale, tear-stained face and red eyes, but not a movement, not a change of expression, passed over her face.

"Will you please take this dress off, Aline, and undo my hair."

How she longed to ask about him, where *he* was! But his name burnt like fire in her throat. She could not utter it. Nothing had happened, she felt sure, or she would be told. Only a feverish anxiety possessed her now to get dressed and go to him, to be with him alone and have all this anguish he had given her explained.

The maid made no remark whatever. Silently she unfastened the crushed and tumbled dress and laid it on the unused

bed. Silently the whole toilette of the girl was undone and done again, until she stood pale but fresh in a morning cotton frock, with her hair smooth now and shining under a simple band of ribbon.

"Master wished me to ask if you would breakfast here or downstairs?" the maid asked quietly.

Flora flushed painfully; she felt inclined to burst into tears. The matter-of-fact inquiry seemed to fall like a blow on her.

"Where—where—is Mr. Bruce?" she asked falteringly, turning to the window to hide her quivering eyelids.

"Waiting in the breakfast-room for you, madam."

"I will go down to breakfast then. Will you go at once and tell him I am coming?"

"Yes, madam."

With her heart beating so that the frail lace of her dress on her breast seemed strained to breaking, Flora left her room and went down the stairs. She knew the way to the breakfast-room, for it was just opposite the little dining-room where they had dined last night. She went down her face scarlet and pale by turns.

The door of the breakfast-room was open; she saw Bruce standing just inside. The footman, bearing a huge tray of silver, came up the corridor at the moment.

Bruce came forward to meet her. "Good morning, dear; did you sleep well?"

She looked up, her great wide eyes fixed upon him for a moment. She tried to speak, then suddenly burst into tears over his hand that she had taken. Bruce drew her inside the room.

"Leave everything, please," he said to

the astonished footman, who had passed in and set the tray on the table. "Leave the room. I will ring when I want you."

He shut the door, and they were alone. The girl had sat down by the window, her face was covered in her hands, the tears streamed through her fingers.

"Why did you not come to me last night?" she demanded passionately, as he came up to her. Her eyes burnt through the tears; she sat up and faced him. Her fears of him fell away from her. His words, the commonplace inquiry, coming so soon after her misery of the night, maddened her. On the bridge of that simple sentence she seemed to pass from her girlhood to womanhood.

"I would have come if I had been sure that you expected me."

"Expected you! Were we not married yesterday?"

"Yes; but——"

"Bruce, why have I married you?"

The man did not answer. His face was extremely grave, distressed. He was silent, and in these moments of silence that intervene in intense emotion, a thought seems to stand out clearly between two people, as clearly as if it were uttered. In his thoughts were his possessions. What were the motives of all the girls who had wished to marry him? Had not each one thought of his lands, his wealth, his power, seen herself mistress of Carlingford Towers, a worldly light, a social queen?

"You think I married you for money?"

She had sprung to her feet. Her whole body was tense, as if she were suffering extreme physical pain.

Bruce got up too. "No, my sweet, not that, perhaps; but this marriage was ar-

ranged for you. It was a good one, and you accepted it. Your mother told me you were too young to understand such things, that you had never read about them or been taught about them; that all you felt for me was the affection a daughter might have for a father. So you see, my own, how things were put to me."

The girl stood staring at him wide-eyed and speechless.

"But when we were together, Bruce, why did you not ask me if it were true?"

"She begged me not to; she begged me to leave you undisturbed, as you were—a child."

More and more amaze struggled through the questioning grief on her face. It was all a mystery to her. Why she had been so misrepresented, why he had accepted such a representation, why, having accepted it, he had married her—these

things were wrapped in darkness for her.

But, after all, did it much matter? It was *not* true. A wave of delight filled her heart. She was his wife, and she loved him as his wife. She had more to give than he had expected. Was not that a great joy? He had loved her, thinking her a child who could give him nothing. How much more would he love the woman who could give him everything. The clouds were rolling away from her sky. She had only to explain. She had her youth and beauty; above all, she had that divine gift for passionate adoration of the one she loved, without which a woman's youth and beauty is as nothing, and love and happiness have no soul.

She had everything to give this man. She had only now to explain to him that it was all at his feet. The glory and

colour of happiness rushed into her face. Her eyes were warm and radiant as they shone on him.

"Well, Bruce, it was a mistake. I understand everything. I am not a child, and I did not marry you for Carlingford Towers, and I don't feel like a daughter to you. I love you, worship you. I wanted you to come to me last night. I want your kiss and your love, and that is enough for my perfect happiness."

She was close to him, both her soft hands clasped his hand hard against her beating breast. She looked at him, expecting to see that dawn of joy in his face that had risen in her soul. But his face was dark with heavy shadows; the pain and distress of it did not lighten. He looked at her for a few moments with those large dark eyes, that from their first

glance upon her had stirred her being to its very depths, and then drew away his hand, turned from her, and threw himself into a chair, covering his eyes as she had done hers.

"Oh, my darling, it has been an awful, terrible mistake!" And the low tones went through and through the girl, feeling like a bayonet thrust through her flesh.

She fell on her knees by his chair. "Why?" she whispered. "Bruce, speak to me. Why? How? What does it matter? You do love me, don't you?"

There was a long silence, and the girl, kneeling by him, was conscious of an agony in him, greater than any she would ever be called upon to suffer, though he gave no sign.

In the merry, sunny room, full of the

joyous breath of June, she knelt, cold, shivering, desperately afraid.

He lifted his head after a long time, and put one arm round her as she knelt trembling beside him.

"Listen, Flora, such love as you offer me, passionate love, I can only buy at the price of my life. My heart is worn out. It only swings as it were on a thread. Emotion of any kind—anger, grief, passion, anything that hurts or pleases much —wears that thread still thinner, shortens my life. Very great emotion at any time might snap that cord. For some years now I have avoided deep feeling of any kind. I have the choice before me; I can go without these things and live, or I can enjoy them a few times and die."

"But, then, why have married me?"

Her voice was just a low whisper.

Like one who, in an earthquake, sees his house and all its walls falling round him, and feels the very earth bending beneath his feet, so the girl realized in that blinding moment she was standing amongst the ruins of her life.

"Because I wanted the companionship, and I thought you would want nothing more. I was told you were a child, and I thought you would be contented with the toys I could give you."

His hand caressed her hair; she had sunk down still lower on the floor, in a crushed heap, beside him.

"Carriages, houses, dresses, jewels, all the things that women like so much."

"And I do not care for *any* of them," she returned passionately. "I do not want any of them. I never thought about them. I only wanted you."

The man did not answer, but she saw

his hand clench tightly on the chair-arm till all the knuckles grew white.

The hot sun streamed through the open window, bringing with it the scent of flowers and the joyous songs of the birds. She was quite silent. There seemed nothing to say. There was no use in saying anything. The whole position was clear to her now,—all its hideous desolation, its iron servitude, its clanking chains of duty, its dreary labour without reward, its complete hopelessness.

"And it is for life, for life!" This thought beat like a pulse in her brain. The scene of yesterday came before her—the dim church, the flowers, the throng, and those words "till Death us do part." What rapture had filled her throbbing heart as she had heard them! She had looked at Bruce and felt triumphantly that her love was above Death itself.

She would live with him, love him, adore him, tend him, and then *die* with him. Nothing would be too hard for her to accomplish, too much to bear or to suffer for that priceless reward—his love. And now—it was true the service lay before her, but without reward.

"Any one would have done for companionship—your sister—any relation," she said mechanically, after a long silence, as her stunned brain followed for a moment a side-track of thought. "Why have chosen *me?*"

"Because you were so sweet, darling, you seemed so bright and intelligent, far more so than any girl I had met. And I was attracted by your youth and beauty. I wanted to have you about me."

"You wanted all that, though you knew you could give nothing in exchange?" The agony of her broken, excited nerves

made her for the moment hard in her suffering.

"Nothing!"

The man did not enumerate those things which the world had taught him were the ALL of life to women. He was silent, but for that one word. But again the girl felt his thought.

"They are nothing to me," she repeated.

"Good God, it is so irrevocable!" the man burst out after a moment, sitting forward in his chair, both hands tightly locked across his eyes. "I see what I have done now. I would undo it. I would set you free if I could, Flora, but it's impossible. We can neither of us do anything."

The girl hardly heeded. She was pursuing a thought of her own.

"Bruce," she whispered, after a minute,

"what did you mean when you said you would have come to me last night if you had known I expected it? *Do* you love me?"

She had risen to her knees and was leaning on the chair-arm; her pale face was close to his, her eyes, wide with despair, looked into his.

"Love you? *Yes,* only too much."

His arms were round her, his lips on hers. In the pain of her crushed muscles in his grasp, of her mouth under his kiss, she had her answer. Then he pressed her tired head down on his shoulder.

"Listen. As I have told you, some years ago I gave up the idea of love. When the plan came to me to marry you, and I talked with your mother about it, you were to be a merry little daughter in my house, petted, amused, surrounded with everything you wanted. It would

be delightful to have you here in the old house, to hear your laughter, see you play with your girlish friends, have your sweet face opposite me at my breakfast, to see it waiting by my fireside at night. I thought your innocence and your ignorance of everything would be my protection, that the love for the woman would not arise. Do you know, yesterday, when I saw your eyes watching me in the train, I began to feel it was all wrong. And now, sweetest, that you have told me of your love for me, do you think I can refuse it? My life, after all, what is it? Some years more or less. I will give up the remainder for a few hours in your arms."

The girl lay back in his clasp in a trance of pleasure so keen, so exquisite, that it cut off everything from her memory, her consciousness, except the

touch of his arm, the sound of his voice. Like the first approach of sleep after agony, the first fall of shadow on a brow long exposed to the blistering sun, that embrace soothed her, poured balm over all her aching nerves. He did love her, and would pay for her love with his life. The idea was so sweet to her she clung to it, let it immerse her; lulled, rocked by it, cradled in it, she lay there, and all seemed to sweep by unheeded, nothing mattered, there *was* nothing in the world but this. These respites in life, how short they are! Moments of oblivion snatched in the great torture chamber! As she opened her eyes again to look up to the beloved face above her, its extreme pallor, a deadly shade of whiteness struck her, and all his words with a full sense of their meaning rushed back upon her, seeming

to crush her under their stifling weight. What a moment it is for a woman when she sees that her love, a gift so impossible to her to recall, has been bestowed where it is not welcome, where it can only bring agony and danger to its recipient! With the horror of this realization upon her, she tore herself out of those arms, in which she felt she must never be again.

"No! no! not at that cost, Bruce; I could not injure you, shorten your life. Forget everything I said. Let it be as you had arranged. Anything rather than you should suffer."

The man had risen and was looking at her; his face was very white, terribly white.

"Forget it!" he said bitterly. "It will not be so easy, but"—and his brows contracted, a look of intense pain lined all

his face—"I suppose anything else is impossible, even this talk with you——" He left the phrase unfinished.

Involuntarily his hand went to his heart. Flora stared at him blankly.

Impossible! Yes, that was what she had said, what she knew.

A mistake had been made. She had been sold into bondage. She had her life sentence.

Suddenly everything grew dark about her. She stretched out her hands with a cry.

"Bruce, I can't bear it; let me die."

Before he could save her she had fallen at his feet senseless.

Suffering extremely himself, the man hardly noticed it now in his anxiety as he lifted her up and laid her on the couch by the window. Slight and pale, with her tear-stained face turned up to him, she

lay there as if broken, like a white butterfly that had come out in the sunshine to flit gaily over the heavy ploughed field of life, and that the great harrow of Circumstance had caught and crushed in its iron teeth and passed over, leaving it maimed and dying in the furrow.

Bruce rang the bell and sent the footman for her maid, but before she came, armed with smelling-salts and flasks, the girl had opened her eyes and sat up.

The butler came in and removed the cold breakfast, replacing it with fresh hot dishes. Bruce pressed her to come to the table, and, to please him, she did so, and drank the coffee he poured out for her. The servants moved about them serving them. No more serious conversation was possible just then. In fact, it seemed to the girl a silence had fallen between her and Bruce that

it would not be possible ever to break again. She gazed at his face and saw the warm, clear colour had returned to it. The pain he had suffered had passed off, he said; he did not feel any more of it.

After breakfast he had to see his secretary for a time. Could she occupy herself, he asked her, while he was engaged? Flora assented at once.

"I should like to be alone. I will go out into the gardens. Send to me there, if you want me."

Half stupidly she rose from the table and stepped through the long windows on to the lawn, hatless, and the sun's rays came down on the gold of her hair. It seemed to burn in to Bruce's eyes, as he watched her from the centre of the room, go down the lawn, following the current of fragrance borne on the sunny air from

the rose-garden. Aimlessly, unthinkingly, she wandered on, her brain dull and stupid, her feet heavy. The rose-garden at the Towers was very beautiful, circular in form, and entirely walled in by green walls of trained standard and climbing roses. The Crimson Rambler and the Seven Sisters rose and the Allan Richardson all disputed together for the right to decorate those green walls. In the centre, surrounded by beds of magnificent bloom, was short, turfy grass, and here, in the sun, the girl threw herself down, laying her head on her outstretched arm. From here she could see the great grey group of the Towers rising against the glorious blue of the sky.

She was mistress of that grand pile, which dated from England's earliest days; but not a quiver of pride moved in her as she looked. To her it was her

prison. For this she had been misled and sold. For this her birthright to love and bless another by her loving had been stolen from her. For these old stone walls and all they stood for, she had been cheated and betrayed. Look where she would she could see no hope, no escape. This man's name and honour had been put into her hands by him so trustingly. She could not do anything else than guard them safely, hold them sacred. She could not go away and lead her life apart from him. Their marriage had been so horribly public; his life was so horribly public. What a curse it is to the rich and the great, this public eye that glares ever into their privacy! If she left him, he was shamed before the crowd, befooled, dishonoured. He had such multitudes of friends and—enemies, and they would all know and laugh at him.

And he thought much of these things, valued his name before the world!

To her, in that moment, the obscurity of poor gentility in which she had been born and brought up, where few care to know or chronicle the unimportant lives, seemed to her a happy thing. No, she must stay now, where Fate had placed her beside him, this man she worshipped and yet must learn not to love; stay bound there by the chains of duty, obligation, to which would be added the still stronger ones of affection, month by month as the years went on. She did not see any escape. The death of Bruce, which, to some minds, would have seemed the solution, only to her set the seal of finality on her misery. With the death of Bruce everything ended. That would so break her she could never hope to live or enjoy again. A life of dreary duties,

of vain, empty shows, of idle vanities, of worthless, worldly pomp, maddened by the hunger and thirst after love which she might never know, that was what faced her. Why had her mother done this thing? she wondered—her beautiful, passionate mother, who had run away at fifteen with her father, a poor army officer. True, she had always seemed to feel their poverty extremely, but she had never appeared really unhappy. Love had been with *her* all through her life. She must have known its value. How could she turn her daughter into the wilderness to starve? She lay there in a sort of stupor, of dull thought. How exquisite the scent in the garden was! How the birds sang! She watched two chaffinches who, in the ardour of pursuit, whirled quite close to her motionless figure on flashing wings.

How the butterflies circled together in the hot sunlight; how the bees hummed in the roses! Life, love, freedom, was everywhere about her. The happy animal world wheeled on in gay, unfettered joy round her, poor human slave, cursed by human laws.

After luncheon, a silent and formal meal, the servants being in the room the whole time, Bruce asked her if she would come out with him. He wanted to show her the beautiful woods that lay behind the Towers. She went slowly up the stairs to put on her hat.

How her feet dragged! Would they always feel like that now? she wondered. There had always been such an elastic tread in them formerly. She pinned on her hat before the glass—a very lovely hat, large and of the finest white straw, with just one fold of white chiffon round

the crown and a single large pink rose nestling in it, a perfect sister in appearance to those blooming in the garden. She stood for a moment thoughtfully before the mirror. Going out with Bruce to see the grounds, the woods! How she had pictured in her day-dreams these walks they would take together when he would be showing her first their home! How joyous and golden it had all seemed to her! Before the wedding how it had thrilled her with delight to go for a walk with him! He had taken her and her mother to Hurlingham, she remembered, and walking there beside him how happy she had been! Why was it all so changed now, so different, so devoid of interest? She knew within herself, for her brain was not idle and shallow, but deep and true, the philosopher's brain that analyses

and questions and thinks things out for itself until it has found the answer. She knew that Nature had had her own ends in view when she kindled that warm love for Bruce in the girl's breast, and had smiled on the sunny path before her feet and decked it with roses, for Nature's aim had been the creation of other lives out of these two that individually had no value for her. Nature only wanted them as reproducers of the type, the race that she cherishes, and to make the individuals amenable to her wishes she offers them the premium of pleasure. But now Nature had withdrawn her gift. She is not one who makes presents free.

All this the girl knew, and that she must not expect now in her aimless life that the roses would spring beneath her feet.

Sadly and soberly she gathered up her gloves and the white silk jewelled-handled sunshade and went down.

Together they strolled slowly—for the sun was very hot and poured down from a cloudless sky—across the soft lawns, and then taking a tiny footpath that led them over a chattering stream by a swing plank bridge they began to ascend the slope into the woods. Gloriously green they were. It was like going into the heart of an emerald, and overhead, above and beneath, and in the tremulous swaying roof of leaves, trilled and carolled the birds not yet exhausted by the labours of nest-making and feeding their hungry broods.

"Dear little girl," said Bruce, after a long silence, as they wound leisurely up moss-covered paths and amongst gnarled and tangled roots, "you were very sweet

to me this morning. You can imagine what pleasure, even if in a way a sad pleasure, it was to me to hear that you cared for me so much."

"I am afraid it only did you harm," returned the girl, sadly, in a low tone.

"It is curious how any emotion seems to bring on that terrible pain in the heart. I had to send my secretary away after all and go to lie down. It was two hours before I could get relief from the pain, and yet as long as I keep from any mental stress of feeling, any excitement, I seem perfectly well."

"Did you really suffer so much?" asked the girl, stopping short and regarding him with horror-stricken eyes. "Why did you not send for me? I was only in the garden."

"Do you think you would have been a tranquillizing influence?" he answered,

smiling down upon her. "I am afraid not; besides, no one can help me. Darkness, stillness, absolute rest, without speaking or moving, is the only thing to get rid of the pain."

"Well, it must never, never happen again," said the girl, firmly. "Bruce, we must never talk, never think of anything distressing. Perhaps in time, if you lead a very, very quiet life, it might get much better."

"Yes; I believe it would. That's what the doctor seemed to think. The heart has been overstrained, and when you have a strain, you can only rest. No one can say if the organ will get better. It's a chance; it may or may not."

"I should think it would in time if you never tax it in any way."

"Will you help me to lead that quiet

life?" he asked, half jesting, with a very sad look in his eyes. "Men are so weak; women seem to have that grand moral fibre that enables them to resist, to keep to their resolves. A man has not. It is all in your hands; you are the arbiter of my destiny. Wherever you beckon me, to whatever fate, I shall follow you."

The girl's face grew immensely grave. "I shall never lead you into the quicksands, never be the will-o'-the-wisp to guide you into the swamps of death."

Her voice was very low; it had the solemnity of a vow in it.

All the noble female nature that the Creator's hand has modelled on such great lines, that it may be ready for the devotion and the sacrifices of maternity, rose in her.

There was a long pause while they

wandered on step by step. Bruce walked nearer to her and slipped his arm through hers.

"Then you will be my dear little daughter again? Can you keep to that? Can you feel that affection for me now?"

The girl stopped in their walk. There was something desperate in her heavy eyes. She looked round, and then said abruptly—

"Let us sit down here for a minute and rest, let me explain to you if I can what I think."

They sat down, side by side, with their backs against a huge beech-tree root that arched itself up two feet from the ground.

"Listen! When I first saw you I admired you, when I heard you wanted to marry me, I fell in love with you. There was nothing filial in that feeling. I just fell in love. Well, Bruce, I cannot take

that back. It is useless to ask me to turn passionate love into filial affection. It would want a magician to do that. That immense, boundless affection that one has for one's father and mother, for every relation that one loves, that is something totally different, and it has no part in passionate love, but there *is* a soul, a core, a centre to all passion in a woman. That is the sleeping germ of her maternal love, her maternal instinct, which is to develop later. This is so different again from the love for the man. This maternal love is all devotion, all unselfishness, all willingness to sacrifice oneself. It is the instinct to *protect.* This germ, this inner soul of my love for you, I will do my utmost to foster, to bring forward; this instinct to *protect,* I will use for you instead of the child it was implanted for. I have said I cannot go backward and

turn a wife's love into a daughter's affection, but I can go forward, I can turn a wife's love into a maternal devotion. The one is unnatural, but the other is natural. The wife's love ultimately develops into the maternal devotion, even if left to itself."

She ceased, and the man gazed upon her in mute surprise and wonder.

Was this the child, the baby of sixteen, who must not have her mind disturbed? Why, her mind had traversed all the regions of thought and philosophy already. She spoke so simply, so naturally, so sincerely, it was evident she had not got her ideas from any book or second-hand in any way. She just expressed her thoughts—thoughts which apparently it was her everyday habit to ponder over.

"To pet and protect you, Bruce, that is

all I am here for," she said more lightly, stroking his hand. "We must not think of anything else."

"What a wonderful child you are! If I shut my eyes I could fancy an aged philosopher was talking to me! To have that intellect, with that sweet opening rose look on your face! Ah, what a thing it would have been to have won your love and enjoyed it!"

"Hush! I can't bear to talk of it. This world is cursed, Bruce; everything in it is suffering. It's all such a beautifully painted show for the idle eye; but if one looks closer into it, underneath one sees suffering, nothing but suffering—like our marriage."

"I do not know if I can prevent my love now, Flora; it is so different, *you* are so totally different from what I thought. It was easy for me to look upon you as a

child, when I really thought you were one. A little simple childish heart that does not know what passion is, ah! that does not stir one like the real living soul of the woman."

"Don't, Bruce; you must not talk like this."

Her tones were so full of vehement agony they startled him. He still had no conception of the degree of her sorrow, her dismay.

He was silent, and they both sat there without speaking, while the happy birds flew and fed and fought and fluttered over their heads singing all the time.

They rose and wandered on after a time, and on the completion of a wide circle of woodland found themselves again in the narrow path and went back to the house for tea. Just before they entered, Bruce said in a low tone—

"Remember, I cannot resist my love for you. It rests with you."

She looked up, and all the grace and attraction he had hurt her cruelly; she was conscious of nothing but pain, physical and mental, all through her; she felt sick, as if she should faint from it.

"I have promised," was all she answered; and they went on into the library through the long window.

That evening she dressed in a new dinner-gown. Never again in her life, she thought, could she wear the rose satin she had worn through all that weary, anguished night. Stained with tears, crushed and crumpled, it looked like an old dress. She told her maid to put it away. She could not bear either to wear or to part with it. She chose a sea-green silk, and it looked well upon her, but

gone was the beauty of the previous night. Her skin was pallid, her eyes heavy, one would hardly have recognized her.

They had a very silent dinner, and directly they rose from the table, she said—

"I am so very tired, Bruce, I will go to bed at once, if I may? I feel I cannot keep my eyes open."

She leant on a chair-back to support herself; blessed fatigue was coming to her aid. She only wanted to sleep.

"Do go, dear child, at once," he replied anxiously. "I hope you will sleep well."

She inclined her head. She felt she had no voice to speak nor words to say. She left him, and went up to her own room.

The maid came as last night, and Flora let her undress her and undo her hair. Then she asked her to go, and, slipping into the dressing-gown, sat down for a

moment in the easy-chair. Before she could rise again, sleep had overtaken her —swiftly, suddenly it swept over her—as it will sometimes after long denial. Her head fell back on the chair, her lids over her eyes, and she was fast asleep.

Three hours passed, and then suddenly she awoke. The lights were all burning steadily. She looked round confused. There was a sound in the silence; that was what had waked her. She sat up, listening—yes, there were steps just outside. In an instant she realized that Bruce was coming to her. That noble instinct of courage, of willingness to suffer rather than another should, awoke in an instant.

She sprang to her feet, and crossed to the door, and shut the bolt on the inside. In the same moment a hand from without turned the handle.

"Flora!"

The word came to her gently, appealingly, and her heart fainted within her. She gave no sound, made no response. The door was gently tried. All her passionate love for him rose up in her, calling upon her to throw open the door, to stretch out her arms to him, draw him close to her agonized, suffering, mortally wounded heart, but that other great instinct of the female, of which she had told him, to protect, to guard, to cherish, rose too and fought with it, and would not let her open the door.

"Flora, you are there, I know. I heard you bolt the door. My sweet, let me come in. I wish it!"

What should she do? The struggle was tearing her in pieces. He wished it now—yes, now, perhaps—but the scene of the morning came back to her, "shorten

his life;" the scene of the afternoon in the wood. He had said he was weak. It was for her, in her great love for him, to be strong.

"I can't, Bruce," she whispered back. "I have promised."

The intense pain she was feeling vibrated through the whisper.

"Open the door, darling; I wish it."

She gave no answer. She stood with her hands clasped hard, grinding into her breast.

There was a long silence; then she heard his feet going, going—away.

Bruce went downstairs in the darkness, and his wife fell in a broken-looking, huddled heap, her eyes streaming with burning tears, on the other side of the closed door.

CHAPTER II

THE smart wedding that had so interested and amused society had been in June. It was now September in the same year, mild and sunny and tranquil as September can be at her best.

In one of the narrowest, quietest streets of Mayfair, a very well-appointed motor drew up before a quiet-looking house, and a slim figure descended and went up to the door. It was that of a beautiful and perfectly gowned young woman, but few would have recognized her as the radiant bride with the shining eyes of the June wedding. Gone utterly was the laughing beauty of the damask lips, the glow in the round cheeks, the fire and light sparkling

beneath the lashes. Colourless, grave, and quiet, in spite of her light clothing, she suggested a widow. She was shown up to the drawing-room, and a lady, graceful and still young-looking, rose quickly from a writing-table and came to her.

"My darling!"

"Oh, mamma, how could you, how could you do it?"

Flora threw up her long veil over her hat-brim. She stood before her mother, excitedly tearing the delicate French gloves off her slender trembling hands.

"Do what, my dearest? What is the matter, Flora? What has happened?"

"Marry me to this man! I can't go on living this life. I can't. I've come up to tell you. How could you deceive him and me so much? Why did you condemn me to this awful life, this prison?"

The elder lady's face paled: an amazement so deep, so genuine, spread over it, it almost covered her look of pain. She had a beautiful face, refined and delicate, that the years in passing hardly seemed to have touched—a face full of thought and feeling—a lovely face, such as one seldom sees.

"Flora! Is it possible you are not happy? Why, child, the thought of your marriage has been my constant joy all these three months."

"Happy?"

That one word was so bitter, so intensely uttered with such anguish, it seemed to fall through the air like a blow. The mother seemed to tremble under it. She stepped back to the little couch and sat down there.

"But—but you told me you loved

Bruce, you wished to marry him. I would never have urged you to marry against your wishes," she faltered.

"I do love him, worship him, adore him, but don't you see what that means for me? I wanted to be his wife, but I can't be. Yet I have to stay by him, see him, hear him, see how good and dear he is, and love him more and more and more every day, and yet show nothing, conceal my own feelings, crush them down, trample on them; and this goes on hour by hour, day by day, there is no relief. I cannot even speak of my love to him. I cannot open my lips or my heart to any one. I am like one in armour, in an iron suit that I can never take off, and the weight of it is killing me. And now I can *never* get out of this life, can I? That's what maddens me so. It

is for ever and ever. Can I get out of it, that's what I came to ask you. Can I?"

She was trembling all over, shaking as a quivering leaf. Her face was blanched, her eyes had a wild questioning in them as they sought her mother's face.

"No, Flora, no, oh no!" returned the other, quickly. "You must never think of such a thing. It would be too dreadful for us all, for Bruce, for me, for your father, your sisters. It's impossible. You must make the best of it now. And what a mad idea when you have so much! You have everything in life. It is a wonderful marriage for a poor girl like you to have made. And you say Bruce is so good to you. Can't you be content with what you have? I was really astonished and delighted when Bruce came to me about you. You may not realise it, but

you have married a man of old family, good position, really colossal wealth."

"And I would rather have married a collier, a road-mender, a man with nothing in the world that I could have loved and who could have loved me," replied the girl, bitterly. "Whatever you do not have in life, if you have love, you are in sunshine. Whatever you may have, if you have not love, you live in a cold, damp cave, where the sun never comes."

She shivered and looked so ill—the white butterfly lying maimed in the furrow—that it went to the mother's heart.

"Do not excite yourself so, Flora, you will get ill. Now you have come up you must stay all day with me. It will do you good to talk. Let me ring for luncheon; you look wretched, as if you needed something to eat and drink."

She rose and rang the bell. The girl leant back in her chair with a dreary smile. Last time she had sat in this little room, how happy she had been—preparing for the morrow, that great to-morrow that was to begin her life, and that now, looking back, she saw had ended it!

"You see, dear, I want you to try and be reasonable," resumed her mother, when she came back to her seat. "No one has everything in life. You have such a great deal, a lovely house, a splendid position, unlimited means, and a nice, good-looking man to go about with and who is devoted to you. You have no illness, no suffering, no bother of the children, nothing asked of you in return, only to dress well, to look well, to amuse yourself. I assure you that is the ideal of life of thousands and thousands of girls to-

day. The tiresome love-part you seem to think so much of, they would be only too glad to get rid of."

Flora's beautiful, restless, weary eyes turned on her mother.

"But all that is only just the outside of life, the fringe, as it were, the little details that don't much matter. I want the real things, the great emotions. I don't want just the garments and make-up of life, I want its soul, and," she added, after an instant, "I must have it, find it. I must get out of this empty existence."

Mrs. Howard looked terrified. "Flora, you must not say such things, you must not dream of leaving your husband. Your sister is just engaged to Sir Edward Wilson, a most particular man. If you make the least scandal, the engagement would be broken off and her life would be ruined."

"And what about *my* life, that is ruined; that does not matter?"

"As far as I can see, you're a very lucky girl. In any case, whatever you do now to change it will make things worse."

There was a long pause, then Flora said—

"Who is going to marry Sir Edward? Is it Kitty? Does she love him?"

The mother made a movement of impatience.

"I don't know about loving; he is a very good match."

"But don't let her do it, if she does not love him," Flora answered excitedly. "Mamma, you know what love is, you ran away with your husband at fifteen. You've always said how much you loved him."

"Yes, I did; but you don't know, Flora,

how I have suffered. We were dreadfully poor. It is a frightful thing in this civilised world to know the children are coming each year and your husband is distressed each time because he knows he cannot support them. I suffered so much I determined my daughters should not go through the same if I could help it. You can't follow the laws of Nature as our social world is now. You can't do what is right and live as we were intended to live. If any one tries to obey the laws of Nature, they get crushed and killed by the laws of man, that's all."

Flora looked up at her despairingly. She had come here hoping to find some help, some clue by which she might escape from her prison, but there seemed no hope anywhere.

"Promise me you won't think of any-

thing so silly, so wicked, as leaving Bruce —if not for my or his or your own sake, for your sister's."

Flora sprang to her feet. "No! no promise; I can't promise anything more. Have I not made all those terrible, senseless promises in the church? Am I not weighted with them enough? I was betrayed into promising those things. I won't promise anything of my free will. I don't know where my path will take me. I cannot see anything."

Mrs. Howard rose too, looking whiter than her daughter; but before either of them could speak again, the door opened, and Kitty Howard came in and Kitty's *fiancé.*

"Oh, have you come up, Flora? How lovely!" she said, coming forward and kissing her. "This is Eddy. I wanted

you to meet. Eddy, this is Flora, Mrs. Challoner, you know."

Flora saw a small, pale man, middle-aged and grey-haired, wearing spectacles.

She bowed, and he bowed solemnly, as if he felt what a very important person he was. They exchanged a few commonplace remarks, and then he turned to Mrs. Howard, and Kitty drew Flora away to the farthest corner of the room.

"I am so glad to see you; and what a lovely gown! But you look so pale and sad, quite ill. What is it, Flora? Aren't you happy with Bruce?"

The younger girl spoke a few hurried sentences, and Kitty nodded.

"I know. Mamma told me that Bruce mustn't be worried, nor take anything seriously; but then, he is such a dear,

isn't he? and we thought you'd have such a jolly time—no illness or worries or anything."

"Tell me about yourself," said Flora, hurriedly.

What was the good of talking about herself to other people? As far as comprehending her went, they might be savages in the bush.

"Why are you engaged to Sir Edward? I thought you were in love with Arthur?"

The other girl flushed beautifully. "Oh, so I was! Why did you remind me of him? I was, I was; but then, you see, there's no money, and mamma said I'd better not, and he himself—you know, he's only a lieutenant—he said we couldn't."

"But don't let the money stand in the way," said Flora, eagerly. "Let me tell

Bruce. He likes you, he'd give you enough to marry on."

"Oh, I don't think Arthur would like that; and then, it's not only that, he's no position, we'd be nobodies. It's so different with Eddy; and then, a title is worth something."

"But Arthur is so handsome and you love him, don't give *that* up for anything, Kitty," returned Flora, feverishly, "you'll regret it. What does a stupid title matter?"

"I wish you wouldn't make me think of Arthur. I am trying all I can to forget him. I tell you I should not like to live always as poor as we are now. Eddy can give me lots of dress and things, though of course we shan't be nearly as rich as you are. What a lovely necklet that is you are wearing! How I would love a thing like that!"

Flora put both hands up to her neck and unclasped the necklet, a string of magnificent emeralds, dark, large, perfectly matched, swinging on a thread of gold chain.

"Do take them, then," she said, handing them to the astonished girl.

"Oh no; you mustn't! Bruce wouldn't like you to give them away, Flora. Put them back."

"Bruce will never know or care anything about it. I have a hundred sets like that of different stones. Besides, he would like me to give them to you if I want to. It does seem such a pity, in this life, that no one should have what they want. I wish I could be made happy by a row of green stones."

Kitty was clasping them round her neck delightedly before the glass. They shone beautifully on her open-work cambric

blouse, and seemed to enhance the delicate fairness of her face.

"Thank you so much," she said, enthusiastically kissing her; "they are lovely! I just adore them."

The luncheon was announced at that moment, and they all sat down to it together.

Flora liked her future brother-in-law less and less as he talked in a tiresome, formal manner, and her eyes kept wandering from his pale, lifeless face to the gay, radiant youth of her sister's laughing across at her, elated, overjoyed at the new possession of her green stones.

After lunch Flora said she must go. From the Towers she had wanted to come here, hoping vaguely to find help and counsel. Now she was here, she wanted to get away. She had only learned there was no help.

Her mother followed her into her bedroom, and stayed with her while she arranged her hat and veil.

"Promise me, Flora, you will do nothing rash?" she implored again.

"I have told you, mamma, I cannot promise anything. You never should have deceived Bruce about me. You never should have put me in this awful position."

"It was not deceiving Bruce, Flora. I thought you were quite ignorant, quite a child. You had been allowed no books, no newspapers . . ."

"Books! Newspapers!" repeated the girl, desperately. "Was it books and newspapers that made you run away with papa?"

Mrs. Howard was silent, watching the girl's trembling fingers as she refastened her veil.

"My darling, I am sorry. It was a mistake, but only a mistake, Flora. There was no intention to deceive. In any case, now I do beg you to think of all you have, and remember you are very young. When Bruce dies——"

"Don't speak of Bruce dying! I can't bear it. When he dies—if he does before I do—it would be so terrible for me; it would break me up utterly. My life would be at an end. I couldn't enjoy anything again."

Mrs. Howard looked astonished. "But surely you are rather inconsistent! You talk of leaving your husband, and yet you can't bear to hear of his dying!"

"Because the things are quite different. I love Bruce. I want him to live and be happy. But I want my own life, too. Why should I not have it? Why should I waste it at the Towers? Bruce himself

does not wish it, now that he understands. Our marriage has been a mistake. Can't we just separate now, and both live and be happy?"

The horrified look came into Mrs. Howard's face again.

"Oh, no, Flora, certainly not!"

"But we *both* wish it."

"You know that is just it. If you *both* wish a separation or a divorce, you can't get it."

"Mamma! What is marriage for? Is it instituted to bind two people together who both want to get away from each other?"

Mrs. Howard was silent for a moment; then she said—

"Ye—es, Flora, I think it is."

"Well, why isn't that part down in the Prayer-book?"

"Because it wouldn't sound well, I suppose."

Flora gave a little bitter laugh. "No, mamma; do you know I don't think it would sound very well."

She finally straightened her hat, fastened the last button of her gloves, and then came and kissed her mother.

"Good-bye, mamma; remember I promise *nothing*."

Downstairs she told her chauffeur to drive "anywhere where the streets are most crowded—Piccadilly, Regent Street, where there are shops and people. Drive as long as you can in the streets, and then turn home. See that we get back to the Towers before eleven."

She had the hood put up. Then she sat forward, gazing through the side window, as the motor whirled out of the quiet

street into Piccadilly. She did not see the women in the streets, nor their gowns, nor the shops; she only looked at the men. What numbers there were! lines and lines of them, men of every kind, walking each way on those pavements. She looked at them all, curiously. What a wide choice she had had! Was it for ever closed to her now?

CHAPTER III

It had been a hard winter and the snow had lain long and deep round Carlingford Towers, but now the spring had come; everywhere the last thin crusts of white were melting; snowdrops were rising on all sides, bands of yellow primroses bordered the streams, gushes of warm sunshine poured through the copses, the air was full of the notes of birds.

The southern gallery of the Towers ran along the south side of one wing, and in the winter made a delightful place for a promenade; carpeted in all its length and breadth; with old tapestry on one wall, and the high windows, letting in the sunlight on the other side; furnished with

numerous well-kept stoves and crowded with cabinets full of wonders from all parts of the world, this gallery made a sunny, restful place in which to spend idle hours.

On this afternoon, late in January, it seemed brighter than usual. The sun poured in, making great bands of light across the floor and showing up the dim colours in the tapestry. The stoves were all burning brightly, making a cheerful crackle as they blazed.

At the far end, standing behind a large and very complicated-looking camera, was a young man busily engaged in focussing, so as to obtain a complete view of the whole length of the gallery. He hummed gaily to himself as he varied the lens, looking through the slide, re-set the camera in a new position, went through, in short, all the peculiar manœuvres neces-

sary for the perfect photograph. And in all these motions and changes of position, the quick lightness and ease of movement, the trim suppleness of his figure, was remarkably striking. He had a very handsome head, suggesting he would make as good a sitter for a photo as he was photographer. As he bent now and then in perplexity over the lens that would not screw exactly as he wanted it, the sun struck upon his hair, showing the immense thickness of its glossy brown waves; another sun-ray slanted across his cheek, lighting up the clear warm tint of the brown skin. His eyes were so large and so dark, it was impossible to tell their colour, except when turned to the light, and then one saw they were grey-blue. But far greater than any charm of colour or feature that he had was the magic of his intense vitality, the wonderful health and triumph-

ant life that he displayed in each quick, deft movement, in the alert pose of the head, in each varying expression that passed over his face bent above the inanimate machine.

"I wonder what *is* the matter with it?" he muttered to himself, after a minute, as he finally unscrewed the lens and carried it over to the stove with the intention of warming and expanding the metal rim.

As he did so, he saw a door in the side of the gallery open, a piece of tapestry swing as it was pushed aside, and a girl dressed in white serge enter and come slowly, rather aimlessly, down the gallery towards him. She was quite unconscious of her companion, and the young man's keen gaze took in undisturbed every detail of her figure, hair, and pale, tired-looking face.

It was Flora. She came down quite

close to where he stood without seeing him, and turned to one of the long windows, pressing her face to the glass and looking out over the beautiful slopes and uplands, merry and bright, now laughing under the warm January sun.

"I am so utterly, absolutely miserable," she said quite audibly. "I wonder if it will ever end? I wonder what will happen?"

The man by the stove set down a pair of nippers on it with a little rattle. He hated to startle her, but he could not play at eavesdropping like this. The steel rattle did startle her. She turned round quickly and found herself face to face with his handsome, radiant countenance, flushed now with annoyance over his work and the heat of the stove.

"*You* oughtn't to be miserable," he said simply and pointedly, as if it were the

most natural thing in the world for him to be there and offering his sympathy.

She looked at him in astonishment, her eyes held and fascinated by the vivid life in his face.

"Well, I *am* utterly," she returned. She was so full of savage pain that she had always to keep concealed that she felt conventionalities and etiquette were nothing to her—a companion was somehow in this gallery, how or why, she did not know. He was not a guest at the Towers. She saw he was a gentleman, but in that moment, that stress of feeling, she would have spoken in the same way to a good-looking burglar.

"I am very sorry," the man said gently; and he felt so because she looked pretty, standing with her back to the window and all the sun pouring through her light hair till it appeared like gold flame. No

man ever feels a bit sorry for an old and ugly woman, though *she* really needs sympathy, but he always gives largely of his stock to the young and pretty one.

"Are you? I wonder why?"

She liked looking at his face, and she was afraid if she did not say something he would turn to his camera again, which she now noticed a little way from the stove. How nice it was that they were not in a drawing-room, that they had not been introduced, that she was not bound to say certain things, that she could say anything she liked! What a gloriously living face he had! When had she ever seen one like it? Certainly not at the Towers. Heaps of men came there who looked in good health; but then they were mostly so heavy too—robust, strong, but unintellectual, entirely material. This man's face combined the look of good

health and physical strength with such extreme intelligence. The brilliance of the mind was there, as well as the radiance of the body.

"You wonder why I am sorry you are miserable?" he asked, laughing; and his laugh was so spontaneous, the white ring of his teeth so perfect, even to the very back, that the girl gazed upon him curiously, as upon a new species. In England our civilisation does not produce this type. After the first few years of youth, during which the beauty of the physique is spoilt by the stodgy unintellectuality and inexperience of the mind, bald heads, lined rough skins, and gold-stopped teeth are the rule.

Where had this bright, handsome, curious animal sprung from?

"Because," he continued, "it seems so

inappropriate. You are young and pretty, and you ought to be happy."

"I was young once," returned Flora, dismally, "and pretty too, but I don't believe I am either now."

At this the man went into a further peal of laughter.

"You can take my word for it, then," he answered lightly. "Shall I take a photo of you, and then you will see?"

"No; I think I had better not let you do that," she answered hesitatingly. "Are you busy? I expect I am hindering you. Shall I go?"

"No; please don't," he returned eagerly. "Look here, I was just going to break off work and have tea. I have my own tea-basket there. Stay and have it with me, will you?"

He was quite aware that Flora was

mistress of the Towers, and she somehow felt he was aware of it. But the social position of any woman that he met was nothing to this man. For him a woman of whatever rank or class (if she were in any way attractive) was pre-eminently a woman. That first and everything else afterwards. He loved women, and knew exactly how to manage the dangerous creatures. He was not a bit afraid of any of them, and generally trusted to his good looks and personal charm to get him out of any scrape he got into, and to win their love and affection all round, however badly he behaved.

He turned to his tea-basket now, and putting down one side, displayed the bright inviting-looking contents.

"Say you will," he said persuasively, drawing a low easy-chair from the wall, and putting it by the stove.

Flora looked at her tiny diamond watch. It was only five. She was so tired of the routine things she had to do. For once she would neglect her place at the tea-table. She might be supposed to be lying down. She had felt quite ill enough when she had entered the gallery. She would stay here now and do for once something different. She felt happy and amused. She wanted to stay. What a new feeling that was! She hardly ever wanted to do anything now. She sat down in the chair.

"Very good; I'll stay if you make it."

He devoted himself at once to lighting his lamp and putting on the already-filled kettle while she watched him.

"What are you?" she asked curiously. "You are not English, I'm sure!"

"No; I am half Welsh and half South of France, and have spent nearly all of

my life in the East. So you see I am rather a mixture."

That explained his face, she thought. From Wales he received that fire and light in the eyes, from the Latin race that well-formed mouth and perfect teeth —things almost unknown amongst the English.

"And what are you doing here?" she pursued, wondering at the feeling of enjoyment it gave her to talk to and gaze upon him.

"I got Mr. Challoner's permission to photograph the Towers. It is such a lovely place. I want the photographs to illustrate a book I am bringing out on the ancient homes of England. I should like very much to add a chapter on their mistresses too," he said, laughing.

"I do hope they, most of them, have

more interesting lives than mine," she said gloomily. "I have been here ten years—just think, ten whole years—and it has gone like one day, or rather like one night, for I seem to have been asleep; I have felt nothing, had almost no emotions, only petty worries and anxieties over small things. One year's programme is just like another. We go to town in the spring, and then it seems one interminable dressing, arranging of social things, standing or sitting in crowded rooms. Then there are the house-parties here, more worry and trouble to keep a lot of silly, unamiable people from fighting together. Then comes the winter. My husband is too delicate for much exertion or excitement, so we spend it here seven months, doing the same things every day. On and on one goes, just like a squirrel in its wheel-

cage, growing dreadfully tired and getting nowhere."

"But, surely, in the season in town you get some fun, don't you?—dances, flirtations; even going into a ball-room beautifully dressed and feeling you are admired is supposed to be a woman's happiness."

"For some women perhaps; but not if you are always carrying about with you a hungry mind and brain. Of course, the dancing might be delightful, but then, you know, most Englishmen can't dance a bit, and suppose there is a young lieutenant who dances divinely, do you think I can have more than one dance with him? Of course not. I have to be dancing or sitting out with all the old fossils who happen to have the same rank as my husband. Oh no, it's all frightfully monotonous and boring. That's what I complain of most—the want of change;

every year's days are exactly like every other year's days. Tell me, what do *you* do? What has your life been the last ten years?"

"Oh, well, mine's all change," he returned lightly, having made the tea to his satisfaction, and now handing her a cup. "I never know what will happen. I like excitement, and I love travelling, seeing new scenes, new places and people. I am not bothered by being rich, but I've enough to go about where I like, writing and sketching and photographing. I am 'an idle loiterer by the world's green ways.' I have wandered all over the world pretty well. I am going out again now soon for a trip in the Himalayas. It is splendid in the morning at dawn to come out of your tent and see the snow-white world of Kinchinjunga before you, the clear, light blue overhead, and hear

the pure, thin ice-crust crackle under your tread. Then the blue spiral of your camp-fire smoke rises through the air with a scent like incense. Ah, that scent of the camp-fire!"

He broke off abruptly, as past scenes swept before him too vivid to put into words.

The girl listened with sparkling eyes, leaning forward towards him.

"Go on, tell me more; I love it."

"Alaska is interesting, with its glaciers, those wonderful glaciers moving onwards, always, their great rainbow-tinted ice-fields to the sea, and those blue Arctic seas themselves, with their floating bergs, giant prisms of colour. From there you can go straight to the Tropics, if you want contrast; the waving palms, the coral reefs, the endless sun on the orange sands, they are equally beautiful. Ceylon, with

its fairy spice-laden breezes, the Indian Ocean, with its blue, buoyant, rolling waves; the Soudan, with its crystal mirage in the centre of its burning sand. Oh, this world is magnificent! I never get tired of it!"

"It must be seen as you see it. When we go abroad we just go to the Riviera, do the same as we do here, and then come back. But don't you feel lonely? *Are* you alone?" she asked suddenly, as an afterthought struck her.

"I am a great deal alone. Not always, of course."

They looked across at each other. His eyes met hers steadily, but a clear colour burned in his cheeks as he said the last words. It was conveyed to Flora. She felt that his companions, when he had them, were women.

There was a pause of silence, in which

she drank up her tea, and he refilled her cup from his steaming kettle-teapot.

"After all, we are camping here," he said lightly, after a moment.

"It's not as good as the Himalayas, though, is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. Under these particular circumstances"—and he looked admiringly into her smiling blue eyes—"I think it is better."

Flora laughed and looked at her watch. To her astonishment it was nearly six. She sprang up.

"I had no idea I had been here so long! I hate going now, just when I have gobbled up all that nice tea you made me, but I must, because some new people were expected down by the six train. Good-bye. Thank you so much."

Meredith rose and took her out-

stretched hand; his was very warm, and its clasp very strong.

"Your visit to me here has given me so much pleasure. I can't thank you enough for this happy afternoon. Shall I see you to-morrow?"

Flora hesitated, looking at him with uncertain eyes. She would like to see him again, yet something within her warned her to say "No." The habit of self-denial, self-repression, and negation was so strong in her that it would not really have been difficult for her to say it then. But a sudden thought—perhaps it ran along from his brain into hers through their clasped hands—said, "Why should you deny yourself a little harmless enjoyment like this? Your whole time is spent in doing things you don't like; you can surely give yourself a little amuse-

ment now you have the opportunity." She yielded to the impulse.

"Yes, I will come here to-morrow."

"Thank you so much. I shan't think of anything now but three o'clock to-morrow."

He raised her hand that he was holding to his lips and kissed it. The action was very differential, courteous, and quiet, but the touch on her skin seemed to burn into it. She had had her hand kissed before by ambassadors and others, but somehow this was different.

She drew it away quickly, suddenly turned and walked away to the farther end of the gallery, reached the door, and went out.

Meredith stood looking after her, keeping himself in check from following and overtaking her. The touch of her hand to his lips had shaken him also with emo-

tion, although to him as to her there was nothing new or extraordinary in the action itself. But this hand was different from the others; very smooth and soft, it seemed to him for the moment that he had a white rose under his lips.

He turned frowning to the casement when the door was shut and he was left alone, looking out. He realised what had happened, that Nature's strange circle of electricity had been set up between him and this girl, and unless broken now at once it would go on growing stronger and stronger, pulling the two organisms irresistibly together in the iron bands that hereafter nothing, perhaps, would be strong enough to break.

He leant against the casement for a long while in silence.

"She has had ten years of it," he muttered half aloud, after a long time, "and

is wretched. It only shows how little material possessions go for in this world." There was another silence while painful thoughts crowded on in his mind and threw their dark reflections on to his frowning brows and troubled eyes. "She says she was so miserable, and God knows I am too. It's such an empty dog's life, living always alone." Silence, then suddenly—"I wonder whether I had better start for India at once?" He turned to pack up his tea-basket and camera. "I think I must come to-morrow, anyhow. She would be certainly disappointed if I were not here in the gallery when she comes." And he smiled. His thoughts had gone on now, and were resting on to-morrow and seeing her again. He did not decide anything further than that. He would come once more, the future for the present he left to itself.

Flora ran upstairs with quick light feet, and when she found herself in her room, fastened the door, and then walked over it from end to end, thinking over her meeting in the gallery. She had seen so many, many people in these ten years, heard so many compliments, been admired, fêted, loved. One man had shot himself for her sake, because she had told him how impossible it would be for her to ever return a fraction of that love she had unconsciously excited in him. These things had happened and left her in herself quite unmoved. She was sorry when men said they loved her, sorry for them, that was all. For herself they might all have been cardboard and paper for all the effect they had on her. And now suddenly she had stumbled unexpectedly on this unknown visitor in the gallery, and that formal kiss on her hand seemed

to have shocked and wakened her, lighted new fires in her brain, put before her a vision of new things.

Was it because he was different from the other men she met? she wondered. She remembered how once in the spring of the year, she had been sitting on the lawns at Carlingford, and all around her were a number of the ordinary black-and-white water wagtails, happily flying or walking across the green turf, fly-catching, nesting, feeding their young, going through, in fact, in an orderly manner, the whole routine of wagtail domestic life, each couple, as far as could be seen, devoted to each other.

Suddenly against the blue above, flashing in the sunlight, appeared a golden wagtail. He was not black and white, nor soft dappled grey, nor any dim quiet tint, but gold and orange from beak to

tail, a glorious, beautiful creature, and instantly there was confusion and commotion in the wagtail homes; the devoted wives and mothers left their nests, their young, their fly-catching, their daily avocations, and flew after the exciting stranger, circling round him, beckoning him, pirouetting in the air before him. They paid no heed to the angry calls from below of their deserted husbands. Each bird spouse had been surrounded all her life with black-and-white wagtails, but it was not till the golden one appeared that she lost her head and ran away from her duties.

Flora had been interested in the incident, the demonstration of the charm of novelty upon the female mind, and it occurred to her now as she thought of the brilliance and life in the man's face and how it held her eyes. She had not very

much time for thought, however, for they were dining early and giving a small dance afterwards; so in a few moments she did her best to dismiss it from her mind, rang for her maid, and began to dress for dinner.

The maid was surprised at her mistress's radiant face and good temper. Everything seemed to please her, and it was no trouble to find the right jewels and flowers this evening.

Eventually she went down a glorious vision of shimmering white satin and lace, amethysts and pearls, and snow-white arms and neck. "I wish he could see me now!" was her thought with her last glance into the mirror.

It was quite a large dinner-party, and she felt much less wearied than usual. Afterwards the dance was delightful; more than one of the "old fossils" that she

set out with went away to his room that night convinced he had made a conquest, so soft was her silver voice, so gay her laugh at the oft-told stories, so pleased her smile at all he said.

Late when she went to Bruce to say good night, he asked her if she had enjoyed the evening.

"Yes, very much," she said, and so far more heartily than usual that Bruce looked surprised, and it was all only because deep in her heart nestled the thought of her meeting with Rhys Meredith.

That night she did not sleep, but, her head resting on the lace-edged pillow, lay staring with open eyes into the darkness.

She thought of her ten past years. She had been good, very good, all that time. She did not think so with vanity

or pride, simply her conscience told her so. She had held herself in iron subjection. Never by word or look had she led Bruce to those quicksands of passion in which he would have lost his life. She had suffered and wept in silence, watched through the sleepless nights, seen herself grow thin and pallid, been wracked by headaches and tortured with neuralgia, Nature's revenges on those who jest with her, but she had uttered no word of complaint. She had accepted it all, and guarded and shielded Bruce in his tranquil life faithfully as she had promised. She had thought of others almost wholly through all that time. She had made no effort to lighten her servitude, snatch any gain or pleasure for herself. Not a breath of scandal had touched her. All her sisters were well married now. Her father and mother had lived contented

and undisturbed in their little Mayfair house.

It was a splendid record of a silent heroism, the annals of those ten blameless years. Only it had this one drawback, in the whole time she had not enjoyed herself one single bit. Everybody had been pleased, satisfied, made happy, except herself. Would it always go on like that? she thought. Was a person bound to give up their whole life for others? she wondered. If so, somebody should have been giving up something for her, it seemed. She got all tangled up in her thoughts, pondering over the ethics of altruism until at last, towards the morning, tired after the dance and her mental struggles, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE next day and the next and the next Flora went to the gallery in the afternoon between three and five. Never had any January seemed so fair to her as this, which poured its warm sunshine through the long light hours into the south wing.

There seemed no need to mention it to any one—for some time past now she had been in the habit of withdrawing to her room to lie down for those two or three hours in the tedious, lifeless day, and now, if she turned into the long sun-filled gallery instead, did it matter to any one? Had she been asked where she spent her time, had she been met going to or coming from the gallery, she would certainly

have made no secret of it. But it never came up in conversation where those hours were spent, and no one knew. To the girl herself those hours rapidly became her life. She lived just for that space of time between three and five. Wherein the magic of them lay, what irresistible force it was that led her feet so gaily to the light-filled southern wing, she could not tell. Night after night she lay wondering, pondering over it in her sleepless, lonely hours. What was this extraordinary leaping joy that electrified every fibre of her being, the moment she came into Rhys' presence?

It was something like that joy she had known before her wedding, but dimly she felt its force was greater, its power over her more. When love has once come into a woman's life and been repulsed, the second time it comes, it is far more in-

sistent, and each time it returns to her after being driven away, it is more imperative, more implacable, just like an enemy, repulsed by the invaded country, who goes only to gather fresh forces, new allies, better weapons, and then returns to the raid.

But Flora was not repulsing it now; joy had suddenly, without her seeking it in any way, danced up to her with laughing eyes and hands full of roses, and she had on the instant opened her arms wide to him, caught him up, and held him tightly to her. She wanted him so much in her barren life. But what could possibly come of it? she asked herself often, and never found any answer. She only knew that she must go to the gallery at three, and while there a feeling of perfect content enwrapped her.

She recognised that she was imprisoned

for life. She saw no more escape from the Towers than if she had been at Princetown. She had heard how the convicts often spent their leisure, petting and playing with a mouse in their cell, and it occurred to her sometimes that she was like one of them, as her dancing feet hurried her over to the south wing, to snatch a few hours' play from her hard labour. Only this was rather a dangerous mouse. Besides, the pet mice often wandered away from the accustomed cell, leaving their convict friends desolate.

One day the gallery would be empty. Rhys Meredith was not a fixture there like the stove. One day he would certainly go. This thought used to come upon her in the night sometimes, when she had fallen happily asleep, thinking "Three o'clock to-morrow," and its terror and horror for her was such that it

woke her instantly, and she would sit up, cold all over, her hands clutching at the satin quilt.

But mostly she refused to think at all. She just lived and enjoyed her two hours every day; steeped herself in that wonderful feeling of happiness, bathed in it, basked in it, rejoiced in it, just as a man taken from a tomb would bathe and bask and rejoice in the sunshine.

So far Rhys had not spoken of leaving Carlingford. He came every afternoon, and with wonderful ingenuity discovered always some new view or light in the gallery that he needed to photograph. Sometimes it was dark and rainy, and then he said the plates needed more time, and would leave the lens staring open the whole two hours that she was there. He did not seem able to produce a corresponding number of pictures to the num-

ber of exposures he made, but then there is always such an element of chance in photography!

No word of love had been spoken between them; no kiss given, except that one first kiss upon her hand. But that burnt there continually. To the girl sometimes it seemed as if she must see a deep wound or scar on the glossy white perfect surface of the back of her hand, so vividly did the impression remain on the nerves of that moment's burning pressure.

One afternoon, early in February, when the sky was unusually soft and blue and the sun quite warm, so that the casements in the gallery stood open and the voices of the birds filled it, she went a little earlier than usual. She had had an extraordinarily tiresome morning—first the housekeeper to be interviewed and piles of accounts to be looked over and

approved; then the dressmaker, who kept her standing for an hour while the folds of her Court dress were stitched into position on her figure; then came Bruce himself with a long list of people he wished asked to dinner. She had a lesson from him on the subject of precedence in which he took a great interest and she detested, because it seemed such a useless thing for human minds to pore over by the hour. She never could see how it mattered which old duke or count went in before the other. "I would like just to say 'go' and see them all trot in together," she would say; and Bruce would look horrified, and beg her to be serious on these really important things of life.

To-day luncheon had been delayed half an hour while they hunted through the library to find a mislaid *Peerage,* because Bruce had forgotten the date of the crea-

tion of some one's title; as for herself, her mind was a blank in such matters; try as she would, she could not fix these things in her memory. In consequence, after luncheon, she had had barely time to go to her room and change her dress and just retouch her hair and make herself look generally lovely for him, *for him!* So, fancying she would be late, she had ended by being early, and, flushed and radiant, she stepped into the gallery before the clock struck three. Housekeepers, dressmakers, Court trains, books of precedence, all these "really important things" were forgotten. For two clear hours she was going to be petted and amused, told she looked lovely, and be allowed to gaze on the face she loved.

She had put on quite a spring toilette to match the wonderful day—a pale primrose lawn with gold embroidery at

the neck and waist; and this unusual tint, together with the rather different yellow of her hair, her topaz necklet and her blue eyes, made a study that would have delighted any artist. Rhys sprang to his feet as she came in with one of those quick, elastic, energetic movements natural to him, which came from the perfect health and condition of every muscle in his body.

"How sweet you look! Are you the Spring Incarnate? That's what you look like."

"If I look well, it is because I am so happy coming to see you. You always amuse me so much, talking about travel and life and things I like. For five solid hours I have been worried with bills, court gowns, and how dukes and bishops should dine. I've been dying to get away to you all the time."

"Ah, you should have married me instead of Bruce!"

It was just an exclamation, apparently an involuntary one, but there was such bitterness, such intensity, in it that it must arrest its hearer.

The girl flushed a beautiful crimson red; across the sunlight they both stood, looking at each other.

How very handsome he was! she thought, wonderful with that air of great strength about him, that perfect health of the smooth skin, the red colour of the lips, the fire and passion of those great grey eyes.

Equally involuntarily she uttered her thought aloud.

"I should have liked to have married you!"

Rhys made a step forward, and took her into his arms and kissed her. To

his ideas, any man would have been a fool and worse who had not done so after such a speech from a woman. But, to his surprise, she did not yield to the kiss as he had thought she would. She struggled to get away from him. He released her when he was convinced that she wished it.

"What is the matter, Flora? Are you angry with me?" he asked, surprised. He forgot that the kiss was too violent to please one so unaccustomed to caresses. Or, rather, if the recipient were pleased, the mental and physical shock would be so great as to leave her uncertain if she were pleased or not. Flora shook her head.

"No, I am not angry."

"Did I hurt you?"

"A little."

"But that was your own fault. You

struggled so to get away, otherwise I should not have hurt you."

"Yes, it was *all* my fault." She turned away and looked into the sunny grounds.

There was a long pause. Then the man said abruptly—

"I think I had better leave Carlingford. Do you know how long I've been here?"

Flora shook her head.

"Three weeks. I only came for one."

Leave Carlingford! How desolate those words made her feel! Oh, what should she do with herself! She felt so young, so strong, so full of life, for three weeks she had been so happy. Must she give it all up and let this man go and she keep back her longing feet from going too? Somewhere, anywhere, out into the open. Must she creep back into that tomb-like apathy of the past ten years?

Now she was once awake and thrilling all through with life, could she do it again if she tried?

"Oh, I don't want you to go!" she said at last, in a sort of agony.

"But what will happen if I stay? I don't think it is wise to go on *photographing this gallery.*"

"Wise? No, perhaps not; but oh! do stay, do stay, Rhys; I can't bear you to go."

"What will you do for me if I stay?" he said, coming close up to her. "Will you let me kiss you as much as I like? You know very well that's what I want to do. No, I thought not . . . ," he said ironically, as Flora drew back against the shutter, a look of terror written on her face. "Then what is the use of it? You had better let me go!"

"I feel as if I should die if you go

away now," she said in a very low tone.

"Will you come with me?"

The query was abrupt, the voice rather strained and harsh as he made it, and yet to Flora it seemed suddenly, as he spoke, that the whole gallery was full of music and sweet sounds, red and gold lights leapt into the glory of the sunshine, the world stretched before her, the prospect seemed divinely fair.

"Go with him?" Yes, to the ends of the earth, to any fate, through any ills. If she had her hand in his, his magic presence beside her, would anything matter? That great joy, the mere sight of him gave her, would be in it and through it all. Had she stood alone in the world she would have said "Yes" with the keenest delight, even if it had been through the gates of Hell that he had proposed taking her, but the thought of others came

before her. Ah! those terrible others in life, what a burden they are!

"Oh, Rhys, why do you ask me? What can I say?"

He put his hands round her and kissed her again, not caring this time, apparently, whether she wished it or not, resisted or yielded.

"You can say 'Yes' if you love me and want to come," he said; "otherwise tell me you wish me to leave you, and I will do that."

"I want to come with you so much, Rhys, you know I do."

She had her arms round his neck now, her lips pressed against it. Her will power was being gradually reduced by his caresses.

Asked once how it was that he was so successful with women, how he gener-

ally made them do all he wanted, often against their will, principles, and interests, Meredith had made this reply: "There is no need to be cruel to women. You can always kiss them into subjection." He uttered an absolute truth, and the reason why husbands so often find their wives perfectly intractable is because they so seldom try this simple and effective method of coercion.

"Come, then, darling. Are you afraid to? Do you think I should leave you afterwards, desert you?"

"I am not afraid, and I am not thinking of myself. Whatever you did in the future, however unhappy I was, the joy of being with you now would compensate me. I am thinking of Bruce."

"But, after all, why should you consider him more than me? You have

made me want you now immensely, infinitely, far more, I should say, than Bruce does."

"Perhaps, but—but—if my going were a shock to him—if it upset him, made him ill? You know how delicate he is."

"He looks the picture of health."

"Yes, doesn't he?" answered Flora, eagerly. "He *is* well now, but that is only because I have kept his life perfectly tranquil. I never allow anything to worry him, or anybody to annoy or contradict him. Everything is made to give way to him."

"What a good little wife you have been to him!"

"I am not really his wife, you know," she said, in a low tone.

"Flora, what do you mean? You were married."

"Oh, yes, terribly married, as far as

ceremonies go, but I have never lived with Bruce, never at any time, never, never."

Meredith held her very close to him.

"My sweet, then——"

"Yes, Rhys," she said, looking up and meeting his eyes now, "it is quite true. I was married at sixteen, and I have just lived here in this great place as any other girl might. And what is more, of all the men I have seen I have never cared for any one at all, never been moved by them in the least bit. Do you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you."

She was making it harder every moment for him to leave her, if that was going to be her ultimate decision. Did she know that? he wondered. But he would not leave her now. No, somehow or other she should come with him. The white-rose fragrance of her hair, the ar-

dour in the soft, passionate eyes, the complete love for himself that he read there, took away from him sense of everything except that he must take her.

"It seems to me you don't belong to Bruce at all. He has no right to keep you here. You say I have given you so much happiness?"

"So you have. Other men have cared for me and wanted to please me, but they have not had the power. I liked feeling that my presence made them happy; that was nice, of course, but they could not give me anything in return, they could not make me happy, but you do each time I see you, and I am very grateful to you."

"Come and belong to me, then."

"Oh, Rhys, why did I not meet with you at sixteen, before I was married, ten years ago!"

"Ten years ago?" and his face darkened. "I don't know if I should have dared to take you then," he muttered.

"Why?"

"Oh, well, never mind, don't let us think of the past. We can't help it. We have still the future. Say we shall spend it together?"

"I cannot, Rhys; no, I can't. I don't know what to do. I must think. Let me go now. Bruce said he specially wanted me to appear at tea, so I can't stay with you this afternoon."

"Flora, I can't go on like this, it's too miserable. Just while I am here it's all right, but I do suffer so when I have to leave you. Come and see me again this evening after dinner, if you must go now, and bring me your decision. I will go back to the inn and get dinner. Then

I will come and wait here for you at nine o'clock. Come any time you can, when you are free. I will wait."

"Oh, Rhys, they close the Towers door at ten. How would you get out? Won't to-morrow afternoon as usual do?"

"No, I can't spend another night in uncertainty. You must tell me to-night. If you say 'No' I shall leave Carlingford by the twelve express and go up to town, and get off to India as soon as I can."

Flora whitened to the lips. "You are cruel," she said, in a low tone.

"No, I am not. It is utterly useless to go on like this. I don't want to force you, Flora. If you think it best for you to try and forget all about me, let me go alone. I don't want to disturb your life or to take you away against your will, especially as the life with me would be infinitely poorer. You give up your po-

sition, you sacrifice everything. You might regret it."

He had dropped his arms now, and stood leaning against the wall looking at her. She gazed back at him, enchained, fascinated, thinking how perfect the figure, how beautiful the face, how easy every attitude! Could she part with him? In her distress she seized the woman's invariable weapon—delay. Not now, but some other time, to make the decision! If it were only an hour or two, it was delay.

"I don't know what to do," she said hurriedly; "but I will come here this evening, some time, I can't promise when, if you will wait."

"I have said I will wait."

"But how can you leave after? It is difficult to open the big door."

"I can swing myself down by the ivy

from this window. Do not trouble about me. Think about yourself, and what you will say when you come."

He came over and kissed her again. He was not sure that she was subdued yet. She clung to him for a moment, then tore herself away.

"I must go. I am so afraid Bruce may be waiting. Good-bye till the evening."

"Good-bye, dearest!"

CHAPTER V

FROM the gallery the girl ran with flying feet through the passages and corridors of the south wing straight to the tea-room that overlooked the west court, sobering her pace as she neared her destination. She wanted to be away somewhere alone in the quiet to think, to recover from the shock of those kisses and those burning words, but her watch told her she was ten minutes late already for the hour when Bruce had wished her to be present, so it was impossible to escape.

When she entered the room was full of people, but she saw they were just the county set who on fine days drove over to tea at the Towers. Some expected guests had not arrived. Bruce was vexed that

she was late, and handed her a telegram in silence.

She took it, and with uncertain vision read the lines, to the effect that, owing to sudden illness in the family, the visit must be postponed. She was glad. If she were to go, better that the Towers should not be full of visitors. But could she go? Surely not. Such a thing only seemed possible when Rhys held her in his arms.

In the same dreamlike condition she slipped into her place at the tea-table—the little tea-table over which she had presided for ten years. Bruce was put out now because she was ten minutes late, but what would it be when she was never there any more at all? But then, he could so easily replace her! Get some one else, ornamental and good-tempered, to sit in her place. She did not want to

go on for ever with this aimless presiding over tea and dinner tables.

Rhys wanted her for other things, that was the hold he had over her. She slipped away as soon as she could after tea. She had listened patiently to the dean's wife while she unfolded her scheme for a new flannel club for the village; she had turned a sympathetic ear to an old duchess who took her through all the details of her last indisposition; she had listened with interest to the son of the same lady while he enthused over cricket; and then Bruce took them all into the garden, and she was free to rush up to her room, lock herself in, and think wildly over those kisses and her coming fate.

If she let Rhys go, she felt her destiny was settled; she would live and die at the Towers. If not for him, certainly for no

other would she leave her post. This man stood out alone against the many she had seen. She had no idea what his material position might be, what sort of privations she might be called upon to suffer with him, but she felt, she saw, he was the one man out of all others she would have chosen to satisfy her heart. He had the same ardent nature, the same desire to enjoy life to the full, the same wide intellect as her own.

She felt her first girlish love for Bruce was as nothing to what her love for this man, now she was again awake, would become. After an hour she had to dress for dinner, and that hour of anguished struggle went by like a few moments, so absorbed was she in painful, excited thought. When she went down to dinner it was to dine with Bruce alone, and as it happened Fate made him harden the

girl's heart against him. He talked on the subjects that had annoyed him at luncheon, her ignorance of and inattention to the rules of precedence; advised her to get the book upon it and study it several hours every day, and to write out tables of imaginary dinner-parties, and study out how to send the guests in, that she might be less trouble to him, and wound up by remarking that if she could not do better than she generally did, in the future, he had better get his sister to come down and stay there, and let *her* arrange the dinner-parties.

This to Flora, with Meredith waiting to take her in his arms in the gallery! She glanced at the clock. It was 9.15. According to her custom she heard all Bruce had to say in silence, sitting with downcast eyes in her place, making no remark and offering no contradiction.

When he ceased she merely murmured she was sorry. But that conversation decided her. She was not suited to this position. He had practically told her so to-night, and she quite agreed. She was far more suited to be kissed by Meredith and to share his travels than to preside over Carlingford dinner-tables. If Bruce wished his sister to take her place she was ready to surrender it, and for ever.

At 9.30, when they had sat in silence for a quarter of an hour, she rose and gently said good night. Then she went upstairs as if to her own room, but instead of entering it she turned aside, descended another staircase, and then ran over to the south wing. There was a bright moon high in the sky, and the silver light fell in patches into the corridors, showing her the way.

Bruce felt a little sorry and disturbed after she had left him. He had not meant to be unkind, but perhaps he had seemed so. In point of fact, it was not very easy for him to be always as good and kind to her as he felt she deserved. This was not because his real affection for her was less, but the soul of love between man and woman is passion, and when for any reason the passion is not there, the love and the evidences of love decline.

When Flora entered the gallery it was full from end to end of silver light, and she saw Meredith pacing restlessly up and down waiting for her.

As she came in with her light flying steps, he went forward to meet her.

"My darling, have you decided?"

"Yes, Rhys," she whispered excitedly,

"I will come if you wish it, but I must tell him first."

"Tell whom what?"

"I must tell Bruce I want to go away and ask his consent; then, if he gives it, I will come."

Meredith looked amazed. In the clear moonlight she could see the varying expressions of his face distinctly.

"But that settles it. Of course, he will not let you go."

"Leave it to me, Rhys. I think he will. He does not now fully realise how wretched I have been all this time, but I will tell him to-night."

Meredith took her into his arms and kissed her.

"These are my last kisses. If you tell him you will never come to me. You will remain here at the Towers, and I

shall go out to India and live and die there."

"You will *not*. I am coming with you."

"But why not come and leave a note for him?"

"I could not do that. The shock would be too great. But if I explain everything very carefully and gradually and quietly, I think it will be all right. Fancy! only this evening he was wishing his sister to come down, and saying I was not fitted to my position! Was it not funny? And I want to ask him to divorce me as soon as he can. Then we can marry. You would like that, wouldn't you?"

Over the face above hers she saw a look of pain, of distress, of some perplexity pass. She could not quite interpret

it, but she saw plainly the idea was not pleasing to him.

"You don't wish it?"

"My darling, of course I wish it! I would marry you this moment if I could."

The tones were so warm, the expression so sweet as he smiled down upon her, that she was satisfied.

Her mind now was in such a driving, seething whirlpool of emotion that any one thought or idea was soon lost in it, like a stone thrown into an eddying current. There was so much to think of, so much to decide, the feeling of pain under his passing frown was soon lost.

They talked for a few moments together, but Flora was quite firm on the point. Only on the condition that she told Bruce, and he consented, would she come. Rhys rarely argued with women

or sought to deter them once he saw their minds were fixed on some abstract principle.

"Well, I have told you what I think—that you will not be able to come," he said at last, "unless you can get away secretly. If you can, go to-night to the station here and take the twelve express to town. I was going to take that, but now I shall go by an earlier train."

"Can't we go together?" she interrupted him. That was what she wished—only that, to remain with him.

"No, not from Carlingford. Never mind, my darling, don't ask me. I have my own reasons for not wishing to travel from here in the same train with you. When you reach town go to this hotel. I have written down this address for you on this card. Wait for me there. I will

join you to-morrow at five. Then we can take the train from there to Dover together. Will you do that?"

She was in his arms, his lips on hers as he ended. She could say, do, think, nothing but what he wished.

"Then, my sweet, I had better go now. I shall only just have time to catch the earlier train, and you will have all you can do between this and twelve. Good night, my own! Our last good night, I trust! To-morrow night—ah! Flora, do you think of to-morrow night?"

They were both so absorbed in each other in the intense happiness of that last kiss that they neither of them heard the door in the side of the gallery open, nor see the tapestry sway in the moonlight, just as it had moved over her head when she had entered the gallery to find Rhys Meredith first, that January afternoon.

The figure that entered came on down the gallery in the white light, but neither saw it. Her arms were round Rhys' neck, his head bent down, the eyes of both were closed as the tide of their passion swept over and submerged them.

"Good night, dear darling!" she said, very softly, at last drawing away from him. "Go now, and come to me to-morrow at five. I will be there, or if I find it impossible I will send a message there."

"It will *not* be impossible," the man answered, a deep, vibrating note in his voice; "remember you are to come. Good night."

The high, narrow casement stood wide open beside them. He turned to it, and put one hand on the sill, and vaulted over into space, catching in his free hand the great tough bough of ivy that spread all

over the south wall and made a perfect ladder to the ground.

The girl leant out, supporting herself on the sill with both hands, and looking anxiously after the slim, panther-like figure that slipped dextrously to the ground through the thick green of the ivy.

The moonlight fell on her bent head, making the colour of her hair exquisitely soft and pale in its silver rays. She paused for a moment after all sound had ceased from below, gazing out on the tranquil scene. Then she drew back, shut and fastened the casement, and turned. She was face to face with her husband in the cold brilliance of the gallery.

"Bruce!" she exclaimed, and her voice rang with fear, but it was not fear for herself nor of what his anger might mean

for her. All her thought was, from long habit, for him. "Bruce, I never meant to deceive you about this. I was coming this very evening, now as soon as he had gone, to tell you."

"What were you going to tell?"

The man's face looked very pale, it seemed strangely impassive, too, mask-like; his voice was toneless. The girl clasped her hands against her breast as she stood there before him. She had meant to tell him so gently, so guardedly, and now he had seen it all and heard it in such a cruel way. What anguish after those years of care for him that Fate should have made her wound him like this! It was not fair.

"To tell you, explain to you everything, ask you if you would let me go now. I have lived here at the Towers ten years. I was going to ask you to let

me leave them now, to go away right into the world, to know what life was while I was still young and could enjoy it."

The man was silent. "And what did you think I should say?" he asked, after a moment.

"I thought you would let me go. Oh, Bruce, Bruce!" she continued, passionately, falling on her knees and seizing both his hands, "you know how it has all been! You know how I loved you at the beginning, how I wanted you, and then all that love had to be destroyed! Yes," she repeated, more vehemently still, as he made a negative gesture, "had to be destroyed, or it would have killed me. Poor, beautiful creature, how it struggled on to live, but I had to kill it! It was beaten down, hidden, repressed, starved, kept out of sight. For years it went on, that awful struggle, it lived with me just

like a living thing, but at last also, like a living thing that one starves and keeps from its exercise and from the light, it died, and I was left alone."

She paused. His hands in hers quivered and grew colder under her burning fingers.

"For years it was agony, torture. Oh, Bruce, those sleepless nights of the first year! Shall I ever forget them? You never knew, you never guessed what I suffered. I did not dare to say one word to you or to any one. I had to let you think I was content. The years went by, those miserable, tortured years, then at last I had succeeded, that kind of love for you died. I had murdered it at last, and then with my murdered love I crept into my grave. I felt nothing. I was dead and cold. All the pain and agony had ceased, but life had ceased too. I was

just a mechanical body, supporting its existence. But it could not have gone on much longer. You would have lost me just the same, Bruce, only you would have buried me at the Towers instead of letting me go out of them alive. Well, then, quite by chance I met this man. Somehow, for no special reason, why I cannot say, he had the power to call me out of that grave I was in. It has only been a month that I have known him, but for that month I have been in Heaven, the same Heaven that I was in ten years ago when I loved you."

"He has taken away your love for me?"

"No, Bruce, no; you know that is not true. You did not want my love. You told me so. You wanted the gentle affection of a daughter, the care and sympathy of a friend. That you have had. All these ten years my one consolation has

been that *you* seemed well, you were content, you had all you wished. I did make you happy, did I not?"

"Very happy."

"Well, now forgive me and let me go. I have sacrificed all the best of my life for you, my time is passing, all I have suffered for you has spoiled my beauty, which is the only real capital a woman has. Do you know that, though I am only twenty-six, there is grey in my hair? For you, for your sake, I have been only a daughter to you all this time, not a wife. Well, now, think of me as your daughter, not your wife."

"What is this man? Can he make you happy?"

Bruce's voice was uneven. Suddenly he turned, freed his hands from hers, and sank into the little chair Rhys had put for her that first day by the stove.

"Are you feeling ill? Oh, don't say I have made you ill!"

"No, no, I am all right. Go on, tell me. Is this for your happiness? Are you sure that it is?"

"I don't know. I only feel that I must go to him or die. It is for you to say which it shall be. He has nothing that I know of, or very little. He makes money enough to live on. I give up everything, of course, if I go to him, but I love him and he loves me, so I get in exchange what I have always wanted more than anything else in the world."

"What is his name?"

"Rhys Meredith."

"Rhys Meredith! The man to whom I gave permission to sketch the Towers?"

"Yes."

"He jested about stealing the gold

plate; he has not done that, he has stolen you."

"No, you must not say that. You must not be angry with him. You would have lost me anyway. My love was dead, and my body was dragging on a little longer, then that would have died too."

"Do you know anything about him? Is it likely to be a success if you do do this?"

"What I do know points to difficulty of all sorts. His nature, his temperament is inconstant, I should think, unreliable, there is very little money and every one will be against us, but, perhaps, because all is so unsatisfactory we may be happy. Happiness is such a wild, elusive spirit; she is a gipsy; she does not like apparently living under established laws. Look, when I was engaged to you, every

one kept telling me the conditions were so perfect, there was everything to insure our happiness, and see what it has been."

"It is very hard to give you up," Bruce murmured, in those dear, soft tones she had trained her ears for years not to hear, against the magic of which she had in agony steeled her heart. "But if I could be sure it would be for your ultimate happiness I would do it."

Sitting beside his feet on the floor with his hand held against her cheek, she turned and kissed it, and a flood of warm tears poured over it.

"Bruce, will it make you very unhappy? Will it make you ill if I go? If so I must stay. I cannot undo all I have done."

"No, I hope not. I cannot tell. In any case you are entitled to your life. I

have had mine. I could not keep you against your will."

"But the scandal and the talk, will you mind very much?"

"I shall mind, but it cannot be helped. I will set you free as soon as I can, divorce you. Then the man can marry you —if he chooses; but if he does not, Flora, will you be content to be an outcast all your life?"

"Content? No, no!" returned the girl, desperately.

"But what can one do? The pressure of love is so great, its power over one so tremendous, nothing can measure itself against it for a moment."

There was a long pause. They had talked in the gallery while the moon climbed up and up the sky; she threw less light into it now, the wall was in dark-

ness, irregular stripes and patches still lay upon the floor.

"Do you think he will marry you?" came in a low tone at length from his figure sitting in darkness.

"I believe so, yes."

"Then you have my consent. Go and be as happy as you can now. It is terrible to me that you should leave your home in disgrace and shame. If we had to part I would so much rather we could have done it openly, honourably for you. But, you see, according to the law, I must not be supposed to know. I must appear to be dishonoured, injured, you must appear to be heartless and disgraced, otherwise I could not give you your freedom. I could not get a divorce. You would be shut out of an honourable position all your life."

"What a mad arrangement this law of divorce is!"

"Isn't it?" said Bruce, wearily. "But it's a mad world, it's no use worrying about that. What had you intended to do? I heard you make some appointment with the man as I came up?"

"I meant to come to you directly he was gone and explain everything, and ask you to let me go; then, if you consented, I was going to walk to the station to-night and catch the midnight express to town. There I was going to an hotel, where he will join me to-morrow at five. Then we take the boat train to Brindisi—about eight I think it leaves Charing Cross—and from Brindisi we should go to India."

"I see. Well, that will do. You can do that now. When I hear from you

that you are living with him, I will set you free."

And in that moment, such are the reactions of Nature, when she heard those words she had dreamed of for ten years, an infinite sadness enveloped her. She bowed her head down over his feet, her eyes streaming with tears.

"Bruce, I *am* so sorry about it all. I wish it had all been different. Do you think I am very wrong to go away from you now?"

He stroked her hair gently as he had done ten years before when she had called upon him for his love.

"No, dear, go now; go if you wish. You have given me ten sweet years."

When the cage door is set open the bird generally hesitates uncertain on his perch before he flies out to freedom. After long years of captivity, when the

gaoler undoes the bolts, the prisoner looks out askance into the unknown. But in this girl life and its desires were still so imperative. She was sad, reluctant to go, but she knew within her heart she could not stay.

"I am so grateful to you for giving me my freedom, Bruce, so very, very grateful. I could not go without your consent, and I am so grateful for all you have done for me all this time."

"It was not any use," out of the blackness came his voice.

The girl was excited, overstrained, deafened by the turmoil of her own feelings within her, or she would have noted its strained, unusual sound.

"Go, my dearest, now. It is useless to talk further. It is only distressing us. Nothing has been your fault, it has all been just a . . . mistake."

Still she clasped his hand. "Bruce, shall I stay . . .?"

"No, not now, now that I know. I thought you were fairly content. You see, my dear one, you acted too well. Now that I know I could not have you stay. Good-bye!"

She could not see his face. The moon had climbed over the edge of the eaves and left them in darkness.

"Good-bye!"

She kissed his hand over and over again. It was drenched with her tears and so hot with the pressure of her own upon it, that she did not guess the chill of its sister hand.

She rose at last and crept away in the darkness. For a time the soft sounds of her departing footsteps came to him, then they ceased, and he knew he was alone. For some time there was no sound in the

gallery, the bats whirred past the casement calling with their sharp voices to each other, the owls began to hoot from the neighbouring woods.

At last there was a low groan that startled the mice playing round the stove and sent them scurrying behind the tapestry. Then there was silence again. . . .

Once the gallery door was shut the influence of Bruce's physical presence upon the girl, always very great, was gone.

She felt sick, weary, and miserable, yet a great leaping consciousness seemed within her that she had to go forward now, that she had set her feet upon a road from which there is no returning.

She could not think of Bruce now. Her life henceforward belonged to the other man. Such immense sorrow and pain wound itself about the memory of Bruce that she felt she could not bear it.

The thought of the other man was cradled in joy. He stood for all she had known of happiness in her life. She felt guilty, she felt she had been unkind to the man whose name she had borne these ten years, she felt she was deserting her post, and she resented this great weight of sorrow and guilt that was pressing on her.

"It is not fair! I have given him ten years! I am not bound to give him all my life!"

Yet his gentleness, his free gift to her now of what she desired, made her feel as if she were *his* debtor. "Am I? Am I?" she wondered, as she climbed the great stairs for the last time now, and the feelings of her wedding evening came back upon her.

With feverish haste she went to her room, the same great room where, since her lonely wedding night's vigil, she had

slept for ten years alone. She felt she hated it. Much as she had always loved Bruce she had always hated the Towers, and now at last she was going to escape, and never as long as she lived would her eyes, she hoped, rest on those hideous prison walls again.

She undressed quickly, and redressed in a plain black travelling dress, long coat, and small travelling hat. She laid out a thick black veil on the bed with her gloves, and then began to pack her hand-bag with a few necessary things.

She was leaving everything else. What a comfort that was, to be leaving behind all these tiresome material things! To be for the future free from the incessant care and responsibility of all these inanimate objects, which so burden the life of the rich, objects which cannot repay in

affection the time and thought bestowed upon them.

Her handbag packed and locked, she looked round, and then crossed the floor to her jewel cabinet, and stood before it.

On a sudden impulse she unlocked the door and looked in. It was a blaze of splendour. On shallow trays, one above the other, going deeply back into the cabinet, lay her jewels, spread out on thin layers of cotton wool ready for wear.

One by one she drew out each movable tray and looked down on its contents—the fire and brilliance, the magic colours of the exquisite stones, ran into dancing mists before her eyes.

"Women are supposed to sell their souls, betray their lovers, give up love for these!"

She pushed back the trays, shut and relocked the doors. Before her, as she did

so, hung her lover's vivid face, with its radiant grey-blue eyes—bluer than the sapphires in that cabinet.

Only to get to him now! A terror of the Towers, of everything, seemed creeping over her. She was growing hysterically cold, a chill seemed in all her limbs. To be with him, to drown all the whispers within her in his laugh! The urging wish to be with him nerved her. She put the keys of the jewel cabinet in an envelope, sealed it, and addressed it to her husband, then pinned on her dark veil, drew on her gloves, and went quietly out of the room and down the stairs. She met no one; she passed out of the main door, crossed the carriage drive, and took a short cut across the grounds that she knew well led to the high-road. She looked at her little watch in the moonlight, the sole thing of value she had

taken. It was twenty to twelve. She must hurry or she would miss the express.

Once on the high-road she walked like the wind. How good it was to be free! Only once she looked back to the Towers, dark and frowning in the hard black-and-white tones of the moonlight. She had escaped! or rather, she had been set free! How wonderful it was! And the ten years of servitude rolled off her memory as a thunderstorm rolls away from a clearing sky, leaving all fresh and purely bright. How she loved him, this man she was going to! It was true she was lonely and on the high-road to-night, but to-morrow night she would be in his arms!

The wild magic thought shone before her like a star. Her steps were light and swift as a hurrying deer. The sharp February wind cut her cheek, but she felt

she loved it—the dark woods seemed to speed by her as she fled along the quiet road. She was going to him.

At that hour the small station was sleepy and deserted. Only one porter and the night clerk who did not know her were there when she arrived, with glowing cheeks and dancing pulses. She took a second-class ticket, and then went out to pace the empty platform till the train arrived. She thought of her incoming to that station ten years ago—the golden evening and the singing of the nightingales. There was no music of nightingales now nor golden light. The February wind howled round the platform in grim blackness, as scudding clouds tore across the moon. But the conditions did not depress her—her heart seemed to ride on the stormy wind like a seagull.

Sunshine and the sweet scent of flowers,

summer and the songs of birds, gay portents of joy, had ushered her into suffering. Perhaps the storm-cloud and the bite of the wind would usher her into pleasure!

The express came up, the sleepy porter opened an empty second-class carriage door. She entered. The train waited its stipulated five minutes. No one alighted or entered. Then the express swung on in the darkness on its non-stop run to London.

Flora leaned back in her corner half dazed. Until she had really got into the train there had been a thought in her mind that she would be stopped, some one would meet her, something would prevent her from leaving Carlingford. Now that she saw the act was really done, her flight was an accomplished thing, and accomplished so simply, so easily, a feeling

of amaze came over her, but there was delight in it. That which she had longed for, thought of, dreamt of through ten years, an escape, and an escape to life and love, was now a reality. She had escaped, and he was waiting for her, waiting for her with that curious, electrical fire in his heart which had so magnetised her, drawn her to him irrevocably because it matched her own.

She thought a very great deal of Bruce, and it weighed upon her to have left him; "but then he has so much, so very much," she reflected. "Everybody was always telling *me* that all those things ought to content one, console one apparently for everything. Well, he has them all, and he can so easily find relations to live with him, or after a time he can marry again. He always seemed to think so many girls would like my place."

When she reached Paddington it was one-thirty, and she drove to the hotel Meredith had indicated to her. The night porter received her and showed her to her rooms.

Mr. Meredith had telegraphed in the afternoon, he explained, and engaged them, and told them his wife could not arrive till late, and they were to have tea ready for her and a cold supper. Would she take anything now?

Flora glanced round the rooms, a bedroom and sitting-room communicating, small but extremely clean and fresh-looking, daintily furnished in rose colour with crimson papered walls; a fire burnt cheerily in the grate, and flowers were everywhere, white and pink, costly hothouse blooms, white lilac and la France roses. Her heart throbbed with delight.

What care he had taken in his preparations for her!

"Mr. Meredith said he couldn't be here himself till five to-morrow."

Flora nodded. "Yes, I am expecting him then. You can bring the tea, please, now."

The man went out and closed the door. Flora stood alone in the little pink room. Mayfair is quiet at 1.30. There was no noise without, inside only the crackle of the fire, otherwise sweet, scented silence.

She was alone here. She was Mrs. Meredith. She felt suddenly isolated, like one round whom a magic circle is drawn, from which he cannot step to communicate with his fellows. Was she becoming a new entity? Could she do that? She was alone here now and unknown, but as Mrs. Challoner she was

known to thousands of people in London. It was full of friends and acquaintances, to say nothing of enemies. She was in Mayfair; her mother's house was close by, her married sisters not far off, but what was this Mrs. Meredith to them, or they to her? To-morrow, unknown, unchronicled, she would pass quietly away to lands, to a life, to joys unknown to them!

Mrs. Challoner belonged to the Towers and Mayfair, to these people, to society. Mrs. Meredith belonged to the wide open spaces of the world, to love, to herself. A sense of a grand, great joy came to her. She stretched out her arms wide, as if fetters had just fallen from them.

"Darling, darling!" she murmured half aloud. "I am so grateful to you, you have made me so happy!"

Rhys' face seemed all round her in the room wherever she looked, his presence close to her as the fragrance of the flowers came to her.

When the tea came up she drank it, then turned the key in her door, and began to hastily slip off her clothes. She was tired now with the emotions of the last seven hours.

As she untwisted her hair she looked curiously at herself in the large cheval glass. She was very attractive now at twenty-six, not more so than at sixteen, in the flush of joy at her wedding with Bruce, but certainly more so than at seventeen, when deadened with her first year at the Towers. For woman's beauty, up to extreme old age, is not a question of her youth, but of her love. Beauty is a gift of sex alone, and it was love now and joy that were busy painting

the girl's cheeks, widening and expanding her eyes, and filling them with lustre, softening her brows, and whitening her skin, pouring beauty all over her. As for the grey strands that the ten barren years had caused in her hair, there was so much of burnished gold in the mass that fell to her waist that the sorrowful ashen hue was eclipsed and hidden.

Satisfied with her image, she got into bed, turning off all the lights, and still in the darkness hung before her delighted vision the brilliant, smiling face of Rhys Meredith.

CHAPTER VI

THE following morning she rose late, did up her hair half a dozen times to make sure she had the most becoming look in it, dressed, lunched, and then about four sat down to dream until Rhys should come. She did not dare to go out. Once outside the hotel door she became Mrs. Challoner again, and she wanted to forget she had ever been that. As she was sitting idly there in that wonderful delicious dreamlike state in which a woman recalls and rehears and resees every little incident of her love, a page-boy entered the room.

"Please, madam, there's a lady come to see you."

Flora turned round in the easy-chair. "A lady? I think there must be some mistake. What is her name?"

"Well, madam, it's the same name as yours, Mrs. Meredith."

The boy's face was blank, impassive, whatever thought may have traversed his stolid brain did not appear on it.

The girl's heart stood still. What was this? Oh, why had *he* not come? Would anything prevent them now——? Who was this? His mother? . . . sister-in-law? . . . His—his—his—oh, not that! So did the disjointed, broken thoughts fly through her in that second's pause.

"Show the lady in to me, please," she said calmly the next moment, and the boy disappeared.

Flora rose, and stood waiting. She would not think; she merely waited.

Her face was like a statue's in its repose.

After a few moments the door opened, and her visitor appeared.

She was a tall woman, extremely well and fashionably dressed, her face was rather handsome in feature, but her lips were thin and hard, and her eyes vindictive. As she entered and the boy closed the door, Flora indicated a chair, and the two women sat down facing each other.

"I expect you can guess who I am," the woman began, without any preamble. "I am Mrs. Rhys Meredith, Rhys' wife." Her voice was not unpleasant; it was gentle, and had now an accent of cynical amusement in it.

Flora's face did not alter; the blow was tremendous, the horrible shock of it went through and through her, but she was of the race and blood whose members do not show their wounds to an enemy.

"You did not know that he had a wife, I suppose?" pursued the woman, with a slight laugh.

"I do not know that he has one now," replied Flora, coldly.

"You don't believe what I say? I expected that, so I have brought you the proof from my lawyer. Will you look at that?"

She handed across the narrow space that intervened between them a long envelope. Flora took it reluctantly.

"I should think you had better know the truth about Rhys," her visitor went on. "The truth is what you will never hear from Rhys himself."

Flora drew out mechanically from the envelope a folded paper, opened it, and looked at it. She saw at once what it purported to be, and what it probably was, the copy of a certificate of marriage.

She saw the wedding had taken place in Calcutta fifteen years ago between Rhys Meredith and Sophia Bryan, who was then twenty-eight, while he was twenty-two. She took in all the main facts that the slip of paper imparted to her; then she refolded it, put it back in the envelope, and handed it to the other.

"Well, why have you come to see me?" she asked quietly.

The other woman looked astonished and a little disconcerted.

"Are you not here as Mrs. Meredith?" she asked, to which Flora nodded. "That is not your name, it's a false name, and what is more, it is *my* name. I was very considerate just now. I did not tell these people who you were, though I knew very well. Do you suppose they would keep you here a minute if they

knew? Of course not; they would turn you out immediately."

Flora's face paled to the lips. A deadly pain seemed closing round her heart, gripping it, so that she could hardly speak.

Like most people who have lived all their lives in obedience to the established laws and conventions, she had never realised their power. She was beginning to feel dimly now that she was face to face with a monstrous force—a Moloch so huge, so gigantic, that her little feeble life, her little weak body and soul, would be snapped in a moment in its iron jaws —if it caught her.

But it should not; no, it should not. She and Rhys would escape. Thank Heaven! Mayfair was not the whole world!

Whatever legal status this woman be-

fore her had, she felt sure she had no ethical right to the name and the life of Rhys. One glance at her face told her that. The great primitive right of a woman to a man, as of a man to a woman, is that one can make the other happy. No individual has the right to claim another's life to make him unhappy, not a hundred marriage ceremonies can justify that.

The girl's brave, clever nature rose under the pressure that would have crushed another.

There were other names in the world beside that of Meredith—if that were already taken!

"I am sorry I am here under your name," she said, after a moment, "and I am obliged to you for your consideration. I did not know about it. I will not use your name again."

"Oh no; I guessed Rhys hadn't told you about me," returned the other, lightly, "nor his family either; it wouldn't be like him at all to tell you."

"What family?"

"His children; there are five of them. We lived together for seven years, then I got tired of it. I told him so. I could not go on like that. Then he went to other women. I could not stand that. Why should I? So I left him altogether."

"Eight years ago you left him finally?" Flora asked; her lips and throat were dry.

"Yes; he often asked me to come back at first. I would not do that; but I always kept him in view."

"Why?"

"Oh, to see what he did. Of course he was always with women. You see, he

can't divorce me, for I don't care a bit about men. My life is open enough. No one can find any fault with it, but I can divorce him if I choose; but, of course, I don't choose."

"Why? If you don't want him yourself, why not let him be happy with some one else?"

"Why should I?" repeated the other. "My position is better as it is; besides, hunting him down wherever he is, and making him uncomfortable, has been my amusement these last eight years. Legally, I can only divorce him, and *that* I know would put him in the seventh heaven; but socially, under the social law, I can punish him beautifully."

Flora gazed at her in amazement. She was speaking with great animation now, her eyes were sparkling. She enjoyed her power evidently and recounting her

triumphs and prowess to another. To Flora's gentle, sensitive heart, to her nature that loved above all giving pleasure, this woman's view of life seemed absolutely horrible, murderous.

Yet she had boasted just now no one could find fault with her.

"I have all the money I want and nothing much to do, so you see it makes a little amusement for me," she repeated. "Socially, I can ruin him anywhere, wherever he goes. I have only to appear and say I am his wife, and then, if he is living with somebody else, they have to bolt in disgrace; so I advise you, Mrs. Challoner, to let my husband alone;" and she drew the delicate black scarf a little closer round her rather aristocratic neck, as if she were about to leave.

Flora hoped she would. The mere presence of this woman made her feel ill. It seemed to her as if she were suddenly in a cage with a beast of prey.

Far as the stars from the plains were her ethics from those of this woman.

"And does no one inquire which of you is in the right?" she asked almost involuntarily. "Does the world uphold you in all this?"

The other smiled, and Flora thought of vultures gloating over their prey as she did so.

"Of course it upholds me. I am his *wife*."

There was silence for a moment, then Flora said in a low tone—

"Does not being a wife mean having duties, a wife's duties?"

"It does not mean living with her hus-

band," rejoined the other. "The law has settled that. No woman is forced to live with a man she does not like, thank Heaven! She is free to leave him."

"And torment him?"

"Certainly, unless he leads a moral life."

Flora gazed at her for a few moments, and then laughed, quite simply and naturally. For the moment the ridiculous absurdity of the world's justice moved her and she forgot everything personal.

Mrs. Meredith looked surprised and annoyed. The shadow swept over Flora's face again immediately.

"It seems to me you are the immoral one," she said shortly. "You left Rhys, you refused to go back to him, you refused to free him, you drive him into wrong-doing for your own amusement. It is abominable. If the law upholds

you in all that it ought to be altered. What was marriage for? To give the right to two people to live together; to make each other happy; to help, comfort, console, support each other. If one goes away voluntarily from the other for any length of time, that going away ought *ipso facto* to dissolve the marriage."

The other woman merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, it doesn't, you see."

Secure, safe, blameless in the world's eyes, with all *she* wanted, and empowered by the law to prevent others having what *they* wanted, her position was enviable and satisfactory in the extreme.

This is what she seemed to be saying, though not in words, as she sat there opposite this other woman—beautiful, tender, devoted, only asking to give up her life to make another happy.

Flora looked at her for a moment in silence, then she rose.

"Have you finished all you wish to say to me? If so, will you please leave me?" she said simply.

She felt she could not breathe any longer in the same room with her, also she knew it must be nearly five, though she would not look at the clock to show her visitor she was expecting Rhys. But if he should come and find his wife here, what would happen? Mrs. Meredith got up too.

"I have nothing more to say. I came here to warn you, and I have done so. Only remember this, if you choose to go away with him, don't think you can escape *me*. My detectives follow him everywhere. If you go to bury yourselves in the ends of the earth I shall know where it is. Wherever you go I can come too.

Whatever house or hotel you may go to I can have you turned out into the streets. In whatever circle you are I can make you both outcasts. It's one thing to run away with a single man and get him to marry you, it's another to live with a married man and never have a decent position again. All your children will be illegitimate, outcasts too, like yourself, and remember, this man is mine: his money, his name, his life, his body, belong to me, and I will never give him his freedom, *never.*"

Flora put her hand over her eyes to shut out the sight of this awful thing—a woman, the most perfect and divine work of God, turned into a malignant fiend by her evil passions. Evil incarnate was in her face, and to Flora it seemed that she stood listening to the commination of her beloved in that terrible speech. She was

not thinking of herself, she was thinking of Rhys. "He too has the life sentence," she thought.

In that moment, before either of the women had moved, the door opened impetuously and Meredith came into the room.

"Darling," he exclaimed, "I know I am rather late, but——" and then his eyes fell on his wife.

She was between him and Flora. He pushed her aside, his face stone white, his eyes on fire. He came straight up to Flora and took both her hands, gazing appealingly, desperately into her face. It was very pale, but she smiled at him, that sweet smile he knew so well. Ah! what a thing it is for a man, in this dreary world, to know *one* face will always smile upon him, no matter what his faults or

failings, no matter how the howling mob may be stoning him! In that one face he will see always the image of Divine Love reflected there for him.

He read at once in that exquisite expression of tenderness and comprehension she had heard and forgiven all.

"I am so very glad you have come, Rhys," she whispered. "Ask her to go now."

He turned to his wife. "Go out of this room," he said; that was all, but the tone had that iron sound in it of hate and loathing that is only heard when a man's whole blood is seething with the desire to murder.

Mrs. Meredith went to the door. "I am going, Rhys. I've said all I wanted. Good-bye, Mrs. Challoner."

She had opened the door before she

uttered the last words. They were distinctly audible to the page-boy who stood outside.

Rhys pressed the door to, and then stood with his back against it. His hands were clenched into tight balls at his sides. His face was white and glistened with sweat. The blue-grey eyes were black now and mad, unseeing with rage.

Flora came up to him, but she did not dare to touch him or speak to him. The man in his supreme effort to control himself, to keep down that primitive instinct of his race, to kill, was in physical agony.

He stood like that for some moments, and Flora watched him, her heart aching with sympathy and distress, her eyes fascinated by that strong, passionate face that even this wild anger could not disfigure.

"Good God, that woman!" he mut-

tered at last. "This is how it has been for the last eight years."

"But can you do nothing really, Rhys?" Flora asked. "Can't you ever get free? Is it true what she said, that you can't ever divorce her?"

"Quite true. I have tried everything to get free; consulted every lawyer in London. Oh, Flora, what are these laws for? Are they made to drive one into immorality and then into murder? I shall kill her one day, I know I shall."

"Oh, hush, Rhys, don't ever think of that! There must be some remedy, surely, if she has deserted you."

"No, no, no, I tell you; a legal separation, that's all. If his wife deserts him, a man can apply for restitution of conjugal rights; if that fails, he can have a legal separation; if she is unfaithful, he can get a divorce. That's how it is. If there is

no infidelity, he can't. The law only recognises that one fault in a woman. If she has not that, the law allows her to ruin a man's life with impunity."

Flora put her hand gently on his. "I am so sorry."

The man's anger seemed dissipated at her touch. His face relaxed, he bent forward and took her impulsively into his arms.

"Do you forgive me? You see how selfish I have been, what a brute to take you at all, when you must be so sacrificed. Are you coming with me, after all, now that you know?"

She pressed her lips up to the smooth, clear cheek. For the sake of the touch of it, for the fire in his eyes, for the beauty of his brows, for his wild passion for her, she was going to throw in her life with his, and these things remained the same,

whether he were right or wrong, selfish or not, a brute or otherwise.

"Yes, I am coming. I shall always love you."

"My own!" He strained her to him, and those great beats of his heart, that went through them both, told her to be happy in spite of all; that she had done well. "We must get off at once, Flora. I can't tell what that woman may do. My luggage is all downstairs. Have you nothing? My darling, was that wise?"

"I couldn't bring anything more than a handbag. Can't we stop in Italy and get just a few things for the voyage? I want so little."

"Yes, that will do. Put your hat on now while I go and pay the bill. I will be back in a moment."

He set her free from him, and went out of the room with that characteristic im-

pulse of his to do immediately anything he decided on. He went down the stairs which Mrs. Meredith had descended a few minutes previously. That lady, on reaching the hall, had inquired for the manager of the hotel, and, on being shown into his private room, had disturbed his peace of mind very seriously for a quarter of an hour. Then she had driven off, well pleased with her evening's call.

When Rhys appeared downstairs the servants looked at him in a scared way; but he paid his bill without interruption, and his luggage was put up on the cab by a porter. No remark was made to him.

The manager had decided that, after all, if the culprits were going, granted they were culprits, what more was necessary? Let them go in peace. Why have any disagreeable in his first-class hotel?

Moreover, he could not see by his books that Mr. Challoner had ever stayed with him, whereas Mr. Meredith was a good customer, and if a lady did choose to come and complain to him of one of his guests, he was not bound to believe her.

So when Flora came down, a page-boy was carrying her bag, and the manager bowed and saw Mr. and Mrs. Meredith into their cab in his second-best manner. They could not expect his best, after such a disturbance, but his second-best was quite good, and they drove away undisturbed towards Charing Cross.

CHAPTER VII

THE Indian Ocean lay very still and tranquil under a smiling sky as the great English liner neared Bombay. It had been a calm and delightful voyage with long blue days in which the ship moved on in stately ease between shining sky and sea, and silver nights, in which it seemed to guide like a phantom, so smooth was its motion over the radiant surface.

In a deck cabin, out of which opened a small private saloon, Flora lay in her berth dreamily looking up at the mirrowed reflection of the water thrown in dancing light on the ceiling above her.

It was early yet. She need not get up this moment. Rhys was on deck writing

the last chapter of his book on English Homes. He would be in again presently when the coffee came. She could get up then. It was so pleasant to lie still sometimes, quite alone like this, and think of all the pleasure she had had in this past month.

A month! Only so short a time, but it had been her life.

At the Towers a month had been nothing, it passed, dissolved, just as a drop in the ocean of time. But this one seemed, as she looked back on it, to be like a period of thirty years instead of thirty days, so varied, so intense had been the emotions, experiences that filled it. How happy she had been! There had been no disappointment, no sense of loss of anything she had expected. Love had really been for her that golden, dazzling joy she had always pictured it.

Rhys had not disappointed her. That which she had felt for him at the Towers she could not now exactly realise. What had it been? A mixture of attraction and curiosity and admiration. But now the soul of her love for him was an inexpressible gratitude—gratitude for these thirty magic days of happiness. After leaving the Mayfair Hotel, they had gone straight to Italy, and there, for her sake, in order to get her things, they had broken their journey for a week.

Ah, that week in Italy! If she were to live for ever, she could never forget it. They had been in Rome, and the weather had been warm and still and sunny. Rhys had found good rooms for them. What a bedroom that had been in Rome with its painted ceiling where cupids sported, pelting each other with roses! And he

had been there, else it would all have been nothing.

But he had been there, seeming to fill the room with his vivid presence. He was life incarnate. He was never ill, never tired, or depressed. He came to her always with a smile and a buoyant step, always ready to kiss and caress her, full of that same eager, ardent passion for her that had filled her with joy in the gallery. And he had been tender and kind and sympathetic too. Once, when she had jammed her fingers in her wardrobe door at Rome and been unable to stop her tears, there had been tears in his eyes too, and he had sat up half the night bandaging and bathing her wounded hand.

In word and look, in every way, he had been kind and gentle, unselfish too, put-

ting her wishes, wherever possible, before his own. She went over all this in her mind, and felt the extreme of gratitude to him.

It did not occur to her to think of her own share in making that mutual happiness they had enjoyed. It would have been hard for any man not to have been good to a woman who threw herself into passionate adoration for him in the way she did—provided he wanted that passionate adoration. And Rhys did want it. For years past no woman had stirred him and roused his passion as Flora had done, and her response to him now satisfied and delighted him. He began to love, too, that gentle, devoted nature she showed him, and all her severe training in self-control and self-sacrifice through ten long years stood her in good stead now. Those sharp retorts, that giving way to

momentary ill-temper, which so often mar the daily life of people who really love each other, were absent here. Accustomed as she was to bear with Bruce in every way, to yield to him on every point, to give up her own wishes at any time, how easy for her now to do it all for Rhys! All these things helped to make the perfection of their lives, but the real principle underlying their happiness that formed the foundation of it, which nothing could shake, was that each wanted that which the other had to give, and nothing else and nothing more. And each had a passionate gratitude to the other for the joy they could give.

"It cannot possibly last," she thought as she lay there, "nothing so perfect, so exquisite can last very long; like the sunset and the sunrise and youth and all the nice things of life, it must be short. But

it will always be wonderful to have had it."

They had spoken very little of the past, or, for the matter of that, of the future, which must be so difficult, so complicated for them. Flora had not reproached him for his deception—for anything. The name of the wife had hardly been mentioned between them, neither had the name of Bruce.

They felt in a way like two who sheltered for a moment under a hill on a battlefield. There was a little respite for them. They were eager to take that and enjoy it. They would come out and face the bullets afterwards.

As she turned in her berth, her hair, now brightly gold again from all the strength her joy had poured into it, streamed over the edge, the sleeves fell back from her white dimpled arms as she

stretched them above her head, and in that moment Rhys entered. He had come in, a little vexed at finding the coffee set on the saloon table and growing cold, and the girl not there as he had expected, but the moment he saw that vision he forgot his anger.

"My darling, do get up," he said, coming over and kissing her. "The coffee is all getting cold, and we are close to Bombay now."

"Rhys, I am sorry I am late, but I lay here thinking of you, and it was so sweet I forgot all about the time."

Rhys gave his ready laugh, and took her dressing-gown from an empty berth and put it around her.

"Come in in that, and let's have breakfast. I have been working so hard I'm quite hungry."

Flora sprang up, and hastily twisting

up her hair, came into the saloon in her dressing-gown and slippers, and began pouring out the coffee.

"How hot the air is here, beautifully hot this morning, isn't it? Fancy, it's March! How different it would be in England!"

"It is perfect just now. I do hope you will like your first view of Bombay."

"Bombay, like every other place, will be the Garden of Eden for me;" and she looked across at him with those turquoise eyes that had grown so lovely now she no longer had to keep the lovelight out of them.

A shade of sadness clouded the man's expressive face.

"I hope there will be no serpent in it for you," he returned gently.

"There is no serpent that matters un-

less its name is Separation," she answered. "Let me see your new chapter."

She hated the gloom to come over his face and wanted to banish it.

He showed her the work he had done in the morning hours, and they talked over it while they drank their coffee, and the ship slowly neared the port.

After breakfast she went to dress and put together their things in the cabin, and before she had finished the ship was at a standstill. They were in the harbour. Rhys came down to her with a telegram in his hand.

"I hear we can have that bungalow I asked my friend to get for me if he could. I wired to him about it from Italy. He sends me this to say he engaged it, and it's ready for us. I think we had better drive there with these small things and then let the heavy baggage come after."

"How splendid of you to think of it and get it for us!" she answered, looking up from a portmanteau she was just closing.

This was one of the things that always won her admiration, the clever way in which he organised and managed all the small details of life. It is a gift with some men, and Rhys had it. He always knew the exact train to catch and caught it, always seemed to know the right hotels, or rooms, to go to, always had their luggage shipped in the right way.

He smiled. Though she praised almost everything he did, he never seemed tired of hearing those sweet lips say the kind things.

"Are you ready now then? I have a carriage waiting."

"Yes, I am quite ready."

She got up and stood in the centre of the cabin. Rhys came up to her.

"We are going to land here, and we don't know what troubles may await us; but so far, you have been perfectly happy with me, have you not?"

She had a large shady hat on which threw a shadow over her face, but in it he saw the illuminating smile come into her eyes and curl her lips.

"Absolutely!"

There was no need for more than that one word. She put her whole soul into it.

They went out on to the deck together.

After a drive of some length they reached their bungalow, and the girl gave a cry of delight as she saw it.

A square white house, low and flat-roofed, with a balustrade round it, stand-

ing in its own compound, filled with waving palms, met their eyes.

"To be under these wonderful palms at last which I have read and thought and dreamt about so much! Are they not lovely, Rhys, are they not beautiful?"

They drove in at the white stone gate, and the carriage road lay between a wilderness of flowers on each side. The sun was high now and its rays very powerful, but it only fell upon them lightly through the arching cocoa-nut palms above their heads. The house front was covered with stephanotis and the scent of it filled the air, coming out in waves of fragrance to meet them; some white doves were cooing on the threshold of the open door where the native servants stood bowing and salaaming.

The carriage stopped, and Flora had again that strange delight that always

filled her when she heard Rhys talking in a foreign tongue. He knew so many; he was never at a loss, and he spoke them all so well. Now she heard him talking in Hindustani to the pleased servants, pleased because for once an English Sahib was talking a Hindustani they could understand. A woman of narrower mind might have felt vexed at his talking in a tongue she could not comprehend, but to her it was like listening to music. It was a glorification of her lover that he knew all these things, and so it pleased her. What did it matter if it were a humiliation to her to be shut out of his conversation? her pleasure in his knowledge eclipsed all else. It is this habit of placing self second and another first that aids so much the smooth running of life's wheels.

She sat in the carriage listening to the

unfamiliar language and the cooing of the doves, drawing in the fragrance of flowers, and feeling all her being swim in a boundless sea of delight.

Rhys came back to her after a moment and helped her from the carriage. The cool darkness of the house seemed soothing to their heated eyes. The delicate new green matting crackled softly under their feet as they went inside.

"What a beautiful house, Rhys!" she exclaimed, as he took her through the rooms, all large and cool, and shaded by outside blinds or jilmils, filled with a soft green light reflected from the surrounding garden. The rooms opened one from another. There seemed no doors, only the swaying musical chicks, blinds made of beads strung on loose swinging threads, that opened as they passed

through and fell together again behind them with a soft jingle.

There were flowers in every room, not one or two, but great bowls of them, and every corner of the house was permeated with their fragrance. It was furnished well, with the comfort of any well-appointed English house, but over all there was an indefinable stamp of the East and Eastern things which delighted her.

"Now you must be tired and hungry," Rhys said at last, when they came back to the dining-room after a complete tour. "Sit down and rest here. I have to see the men about our luggage, then I'll come back and we'll lunch."

On the centre table luncheon was already laid, and the damask and silver gleaming under white roses and smilax.

Flora sank down on the oriental silk-covered couch and looked up at him.

"It is all perfect, Rhys, how can I thank you?"

He bent over her, an expression of great tenderness on his face.

"It is nothing to the Towers, my sweet, but it was the best I could do. If you like it, I am satisfied."

He kissed her, and in that moment she clung to him as she returned his embrace, as two cling together in the face of death.

In a few moments he had gone, and she sank back on the couch with closed eyes.

A few minutes went by, and then one of the servants came in with a salver.

There were some letters on it for Rhys, also an English paper sent out by post.

She laid the letters down beside her; then idly opened the paper. She had turned to the inner sheet, and then sud-

denly a short paragraph caught her eye. It contained the words "Carlingford Towers," and she read—

"We deeply regret to announce the death of Bruce Challoner, Esq., late of Carlingford Towers, which took place very suddenly at his home last night.

"The deceased gentleman had for a long time suffered from heart disease, and it is supposed that this was the cause of death.

"He was discovered by his servants early in the morning sitting in a chair in the picture-gallery which runs the entire length of the south wing. He was then dead, and it is thought that death must have occurred about eleven o'clock the previous night. An inquest will be held in due course."

Flora read to the end. Then she rose

to her feet, crushing the paper in one hand. She felt that she was going mad, that her head would burst. Bruce dead! Then she had murdered him that night in the gallery, murdered him as surely as if she had taken knives or poison to do it with. After ten years of devotion, of care, lest a breath should blow too hardly on him, she had killed him—stabbed him to death with her words, or with the sight of her kiss given to another!

She was a murderess!

She could not live any longer. Bruce's death had always seemed to her to be the end of the world, even if it had happened naturally. But she had killed him. What could she do now? She wanted to get away from consciousness, to die as soon as possible. She must, she could not live with that thought, that knowledge

that she had murdered Bruce. How could she die, how could she get rid of herself, get rid of this staring, awful fact facing her brain? It so stunned her she could not call her ordinary thoughts together. There were poisons, and people hanged themselves, but she did not know how to do it, only she knew she must.

For a moment that idea failed her, and she thought of Bruce. All the picture of her love, her devotion, her care, her suffering through those ten years, rose and faced her like the open pages of a book, and now it had ended like this; she had killed him. It was all so useless; everything she had done for ten years was now blotted out; at the end she had murdered him.

He had died alone there in the gallery after she had left, no one to help him or

tend him; died in that great suffering, and alone, after he had forgiven her and let her go!

She had sought a little happiness after ten years' service, and it had been given her, burdened with this awful guilt, that would be a curse to her till she died.

Could she ever sleep again with that picture before her of Bruce sitting alone, deserted, dying in the gallery?

"It is not fair; my God, it is not fair!"

Her anguish was so great now she only longed for extinction, but as her thoughts sought blindly amongst means of self-destruction, they came suddenly upon the image of Rhys whom in her madness she had forgotten.

"Rhys? If he comes back now to find me dead, what will he suffer?"

This query stood before her brain, and she repeated it many times without under-

standing it. Only vaguely she knew now she must not think of destroying herself.

She sank down on the couch, staring with vacant eyes before her, only seeing the quiet figure of Bruce sitting alone in the moonlit gallery.

When Rhys came back he found her still sitting there motionless, as a figure carved in stone.

"What is it, my darling? Flora, what has happened?"

"I murdered him. Oh, Rhys, think what it means! Read it, read it!" And she pushed the paper into his hands.

In a moment his eyes had fled over the paragraph.

"Is it not true? You see I killed him."

"No, you did not. It was the disease; the paper says so. Flora, you must not take it like that."

"Rhys, I can't bear it; do let me die

now! I waited till you came back, because—because I did not want you to find me dead; but let me go now. I can't be happy ever as long as I live."

The man put his arms round her, but their magic power was gone now. It could not reach her through that sense of guilt that enwrapped her and was chilling her to death.

He was afraid for her reason, he talked to her, comforted her, consoled her, told her over and over again he could not see her fault, told her whether she wished to die or not she had to live for him.

At last the tears came in a blinding flood to her eyes, and for the first time in his life he was glad to see a woman cry.

"If you wish it, I will try to go on living," she said at last, between her tearing sobs. "But our happiness is dead. Oh, Rhys, how could we be so foolish as to

think we had escaped and could enjoy? We knew we were in prison for ever."

"Don't cry so, my darling, you will kill yourself."

There was silence broken only by her weeping. Then that also stopped. The man held her close to him, stroking her hair, pressing his lips to her forehead.

After a time her voice broke the stillness again. It was quite clear and calm: the voice of reason.

"It was all useless! We could not escape! It was the life sentence!"

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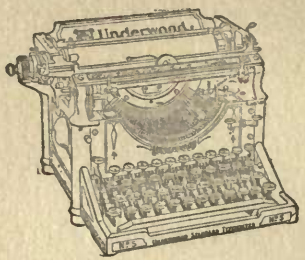

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